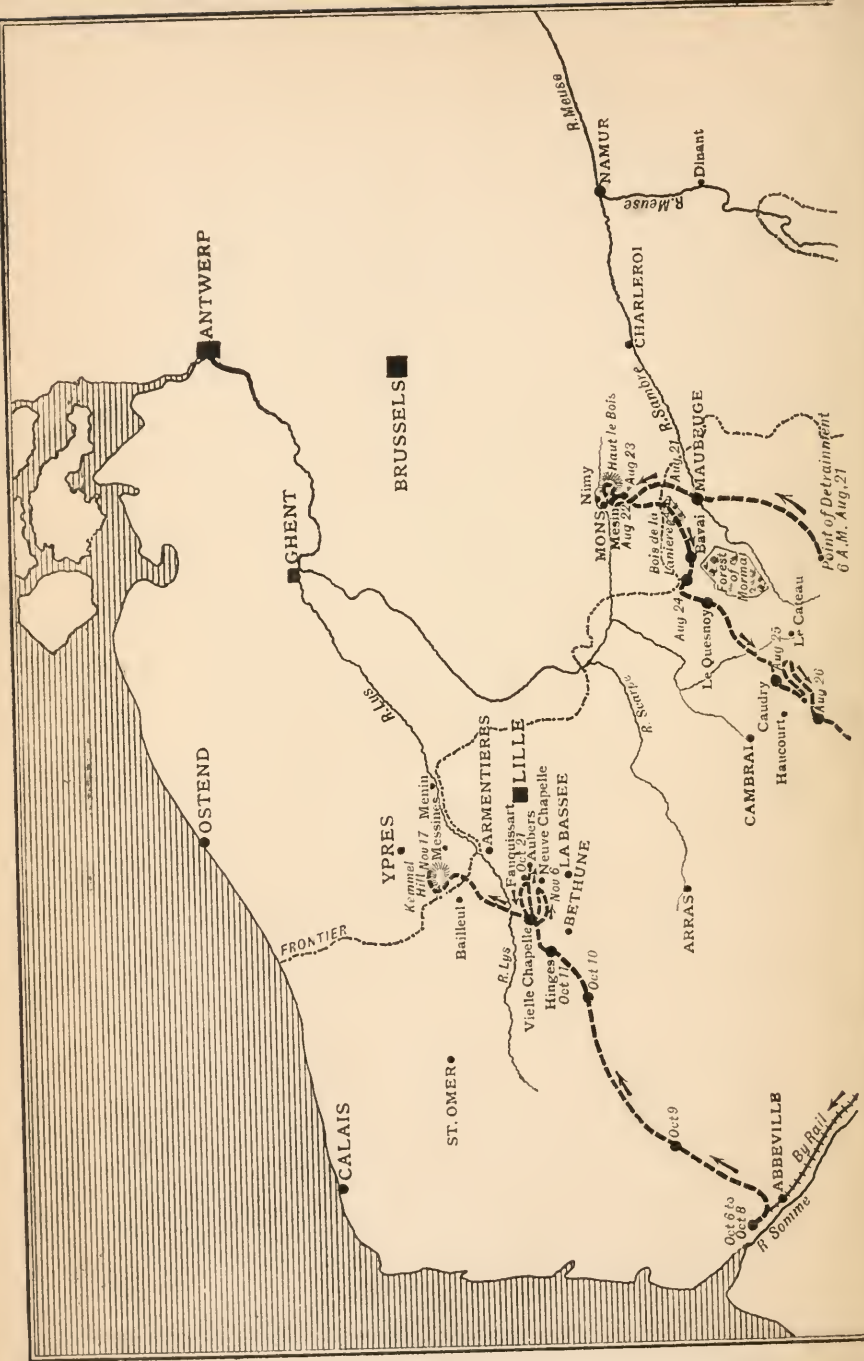
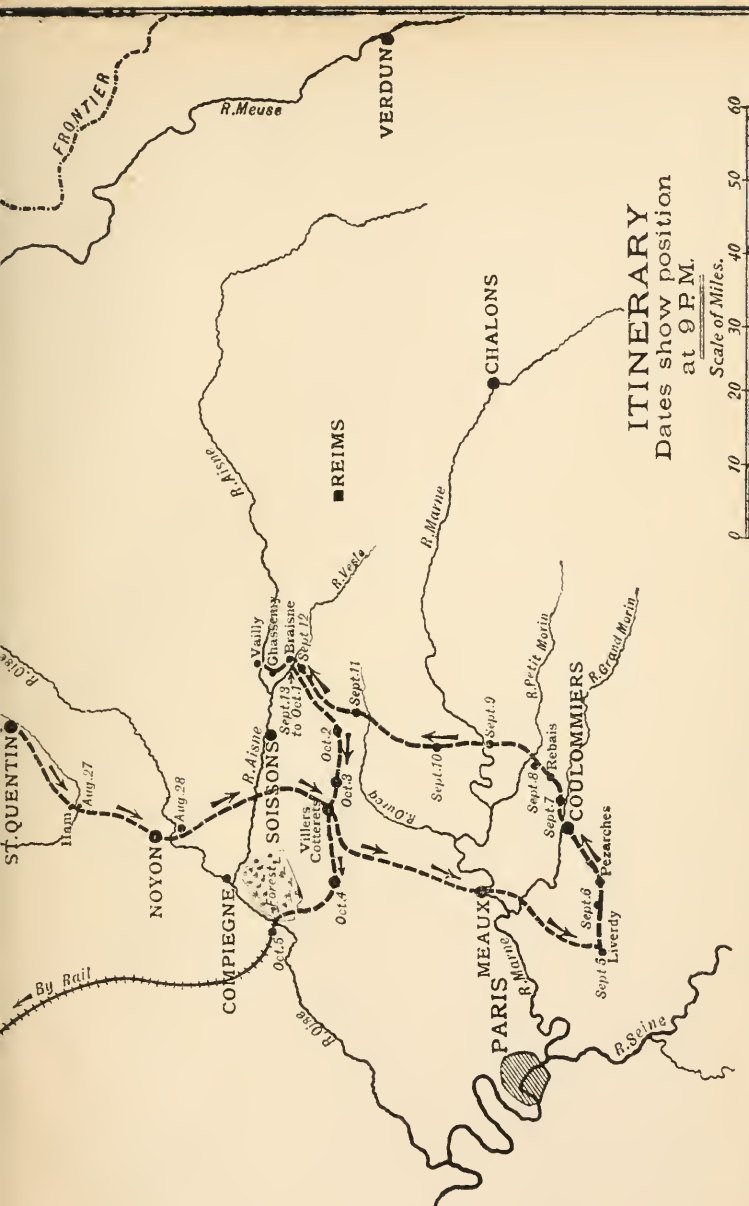


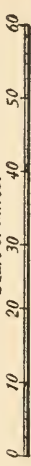
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OF THE GREAT
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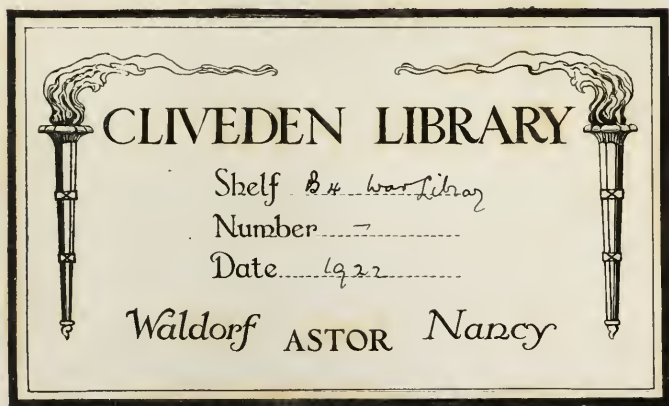
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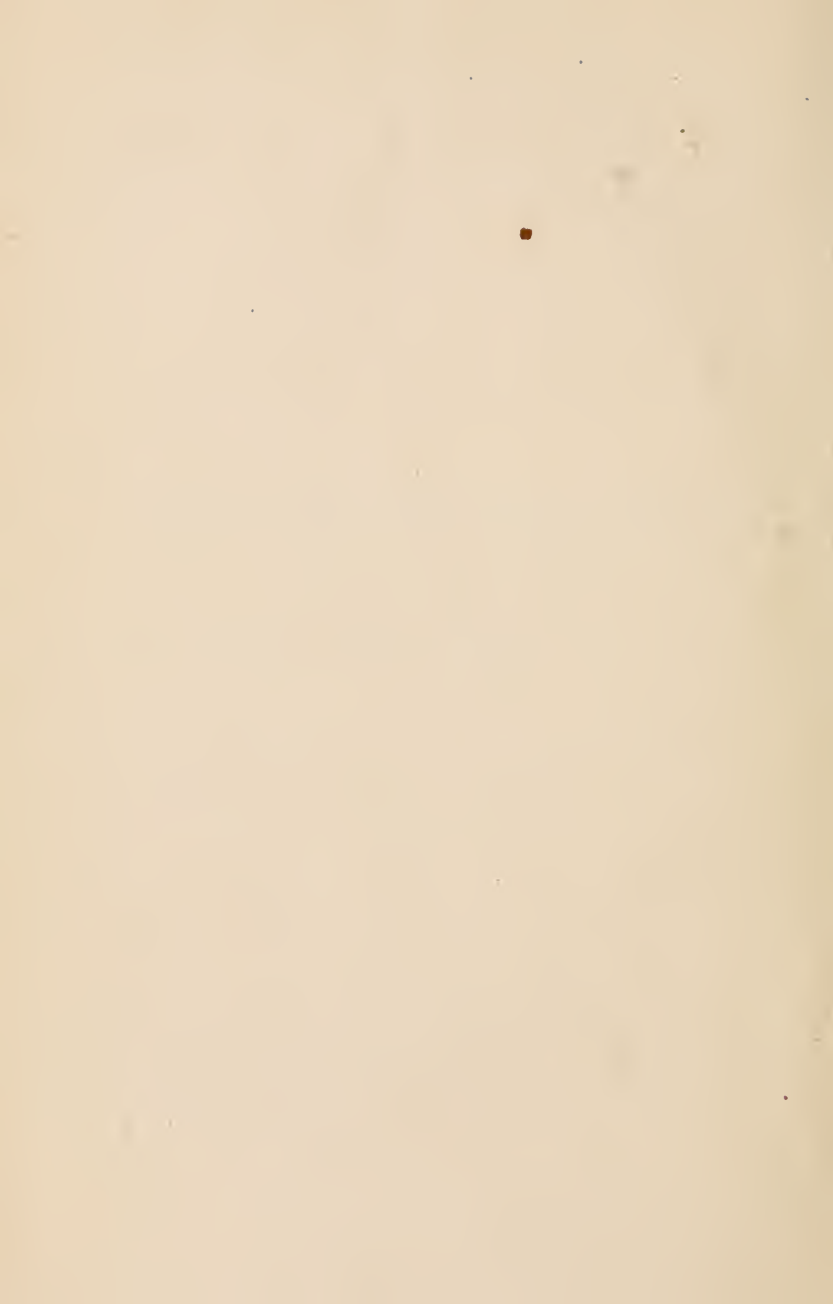




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THE BREAKING OF THE STORM





THE BREAKING OF THE STORM

BY

CAPTAIN C. A. L. BROWNLOW
D.S.O., R.F.A.

"WE WERE AS IN A DARK CLOUD, NOT
SEEING THE HALF OF OUR ACTIONS MUCH
LESS DISCERNING EITHER THE WAY OF OUR
ENNEMIES OR THE REST OF OUR BRIGADES"

MONRO'S EXPEDITION, 1631

WITH A MAP

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TO
MY WIFE

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THE BREAKING OF THE STORM

CHAPTER I

THE GATHERING OF THE CLOUDS

DURING the first weeks of July 1914, being on leave, I determined to visit Ulster, then threatened with civil strife. Thus I found myself one summer evening leaning on the rail of one of the fast steamers which run between Stranraer and Larne, and watching in admiration the translucent green of the Irish Sea and the blue-black rocks and purple heather of the fast receding coast of Scotland. As I gazed eastwards across the foaming wake, a man came up beside me.

“ Beautiful ! ” he said in a harsh voice.

“ Lovely,” I agreed.

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And so we got into conversation, which soon veered towards Ulster.

"Men are mad in Britain now about these infernal Irish politics, mad and blind."

"What do you mean?" I replied, a little nettled.

"I mean that we are all so engrossed in this domestic quarrel that we have no eyes to see the dark clouds gathering in eastern Europe, clouds of war which may overcast the whole sky and deluge Europe in blood."

"But look how the 1911 crisis was smoothed over."

"The Central Powers were not ready then. Now their preparations are complete, and with Britain divided against herself, they think their hour has come."

And so, thrusting swiftly towards Ireland, this grim stranger unfolded to me a terrible prophecy which concluded with these words: "Germany means to strike, and when she does the whole world will be drawn into the vortex of war."

The following day I spent in Belfast

looking for evidence of the state of mind of its dour and implacable people. A hundred straws showed the direction of the stream. Every Ulsterman I talked to held the same dogged opinion, every wall was placarded with his propaganda, and every shop window held a bust of Carson, whose determined and relentless face seemed the very face of Ulster gazing sternly on her Southern neighbour.

On 27th July I went to the old Town Hall, Belfast, which was the headquarters of the Provisional Government. I was shown into an inner room, where I talked to a retired officer who was moving little flags on a large map which covered one side of a wall. He told me many astounding facts, and among other things showed me a sample rifle run through at Larne, and a pattern of the Ulster uniform.

“We work here day and night at high pressure. Our instrument of Government is ready, our instrument of war is nearly forged. If our existence is threatened, we are prepared and soberly determined

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that in the last extremity we will govern ourselves and protect ourselves by force of arms."

Deep in thought and full of evil forebodings, I returned to my hotel to find a telegram awaiting me, which I opened, and in which I read these words :

" *July 27.*

" Leave cancelled. Return at once."

In a flash the truth came to me, in a flash the Ulster quarrel faded away into insignificance, in a flash I remembered the words of the grim stranger, and I realized that the country stood on the brink of a greater tragedy.

CHAPTER II

MOBILIZATION

AT Portsmouth were many signs and indications of the proximity of war. The great grey fleet of England had vanished into the unknown, the guns of the harbour defences were manned by day and night, the sea front was closed by barbed wire, and through the hours of darkness searchlights played continually across the waters of Spithead.

On the 28th of July Austria declared war on Servia, and by Saturday, 1st August, five nations were at war. We all now felt that the die was cast and impatiently waited the order to mobilize ; but Saturday passed, and Sunday passed, and Monday passed, without the fateful telegram, until we began to doubt our leaders and to fear for the honour of England.

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On the afternoon of Tuesday I walked up to the mess and entered the anteroom, which was crowded with officers.

There was a subdued excitement in the room. One of them said to me: "It's come."

"Mobilize?" I queried.

"Yes, at last."

Another officer, destined soon to die, said incisively and angrily, "But too late. We should have mobilized at latest on Sunday. As it is the Germans will get through Belgium and round our left flank."

Officers of the Special Reserve began to arrive in the evening and continued to pour into the mess, where they slept as best they could on sofas or on the floor.

In peace time the process of mobilization had been carefully thought out to the smallest detail, and when put to the test worked with perfect smoothness and precision. Wednesday was technically known as the "first day of mobilization," and from dawn to dusk Reservists, warned by posters, thronged through the barrack

gates to be turned in a few hours from civilians back to soldiers. Few things have been finer in this war than the way the Reservists answered the call to the moment and to the man. Half the Army which fought at Mons on 23rd August were on the first of that month in civil life.

On the third day of mobilization I was detailed to take a draft to Bulford, and there to join an Artillery Brigade. After a tedious railway journey we detrained and marched to the camp.

Having arrived, I "handed over" the men in my charge and reported to the Adjutant of the Brigade, who said to me :

"You are posted to the Brigade Ammunition Column, and as you are the first officer to arrive get to work at once with what you think best. Heaven knows, there's enough to do !"

Brigade ammunition columns, which are now obsolete, were on the outbreak of war an integral part of a Field Artillery Brigade, and their duty was to supply the batteries and the infantry with ammuni-

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tion. For this purpose they were divided into two sections—the one consisting of artillery wagons carrying shrapnel, and the other of two-wheeled and four-wheeled vehicles carrying small-arm ammunition. The whole unit consisted approximately of 3 officers, 200 men, 200 horses, and 36 wagons.

On mobilization the batteries were expanded with drafts of men and horses to war strength, but the ammunition columns had to be formed in entirety. Officers and Reservists from all parts of the kingdom, impressed horses of every description, unused wagons and brand new harness were collected, dumped together, and told to form themselves into a unit to be ready in a few days to march to war.

At first it seemed a hopeless task.

When I arrived the column consisted of the vehicles lined in rows in a sloping field, of a few disconsolate men, and of a taciturn quartermaster-sergeant who sat gloomily in the mobilization shed.

During the next few days the Captain,

the Second Subaltern, and the remainder of the men and the horses arrived, the latter in batches and at odd moments, often in the middle of the night.

Then work at high pressure began.

The men were organized and instructed. Their minds were turned from the ways of civil life to the ways of the Army. Daily orders were issued and a hundred details attended to. The impressed horses, some straight from grass, some from butchers' and bakers' carts, some from livery stables, some from private stables, were carefully sorted into teams and allotted to the various subsections. The hard yellow harness was stamped, punched, fitted, dubbined, and soaped. Hundreds of articles were checked and issued—buckets, nosebags, picketing ropes, head ropes, harness, blankets, tools of all descriptions, rifles, ground sheets, and technical instruments.

The men, accommodation being short, had to sleep in odd sheds and tents, and in consequence caught colds and grumbled.

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The horses, tied to picketing ropes which ran from vehicle to vehicle, gave vent to their displeasure at not being in their accustomed stables by kicking and squealing, and when fed in strange nosebags threw their heads indignantly in the air so that the corn was spilled and wasted.

At the end of the week the whole column went out for the first time in marching order. Across the way a battery was quietly filing out to manœuvre, but we started amid shouts and revilings and the crack of whips. One team in six jibbed, and three teams bolted across the plain and disappeared from view. The bakers' horses pulled themselves to pieces, the grass-fed horses sweated, sat back in the breeching and refused to move, and the aristocrats from private stables kicked with indignation.

The Captain galloped back and forth blowing his whistle and threatening all and sundry, the sergeant-major uttered curses in a harsh voice, the sergeants

shouted in unison, and the drivers worked hard with whip and spur.

But the next day we had improved, and the day after we were better still, until about the 14th of August we felt we had accomplished the impossible and were at last ready for the field.

During this period news of the world was very meagre though rumour was rife. The Grand Fleet had vanished, but in some strange way we all knew that it lay ready and terrible in its power in some northern loch of Scotland. As those first few divisions of the Regular Army prepared for battle they felt instinctively the shelter of the sure shield of Britain. In the papers we read of the first clash of arms along the frontier of Europe ; of German dead heaped about the armoured forts of Liége and of the French 75's rattling death out on the wooded heights of Dinant. With Russia's millions advancing like a human sea from the East, and with the armies of France, England, and Belgium on the West, it seemed to most that the passage of a few

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months. would see the German Empire beaten to the ground ; but to some who knew well the enemy these hopes were false, and anxiety as to what the future held darkened their minds.

Towards the end of the second week in August strong rumours were current that the infantry of the Division were already in France and that the artillery were soon to follow.

On Sunday, 16th August, the Captain told me in a voice of secrecy that orders had come and that I was to move first with the left section at dawn on the morrow. Accordingly, instructions were issued for an early morning parade in field service order, and a visible thrill of excitement stirred the men, for they knew that the great moment had come at last.

Early next morning before the sun had risen I was mounted on my charger, making my way to the field where the column lay. A white mist clung to the ground and a delicious freshness tinged the air. When I arrived I found the section ready

and waiting, and, having carefully inspected the loaded wagons, the steady horses and silent accoutred men, I shouted a command, the drivers' whips moved together, the horses leant forward to the breast-collar, and the long line moved across the grassy plain to the straight white road which led to the supreme adventure. Our start was unwitnessed, except by the great sun, whose round and shining face just topping the horizon kissed us farewell in gleaming flashes, which flickered along the whole line of moving men and horses.

CHAPTER III

THE CROSSING

ON approaching the station I trotted ahead and received instructions from the R.T.O.¹ as to the entrainment. The men were divided into two parties, the one loaded the vehicles on to open trucks, and the other boxed the horses. After an hour and a half's hard work everything was aboard except one refractory young cob, whom neither coaxings nor blows could urge into the cattle truck. The matter was getting desperate, when the farrier and a burly shoeing smith each passed a thick arm about the horse's quarters, gripped hands, and, with an immense heave, lifted the startled animal off its feet, and shot it into the truck. After the men were aboard, and after a last inspection of the horses, who, packed

¹ Railway Transport Officer,

close together, stood gazing inquiringly about them with great brown eyes, I entered my compartment, and in a few minutes the prosaic little station and the bare downs were slipping rapidly away.

Sitting in that railway carriage I watched the English country in the full bloom of summer, sweeping past the windows, now deep pasture land, now an old manor house with shaven lawn and dark cedar tree, now a quaint and mellow village clustering about a grey church tower, and I found it hard to believe that the shadow of war had indeed fallen upon our land.

Towards noon we arrived at Southampton, passed through a mass of sidings and warehouses, and eventually pulled up in an open shed, at the far end of which was the quay and the slab sides of a transport.

Hardly had the train stopped than an excited officer with "Embarkation Staff" on an arm-band appeared from nowhere, and in a disagreeable voice said, "Hurry up, please, and get your unit out. I can't have the train waiting here all day." In-

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dignantly I pointed out that we had not arrived ten seconds, and that we had no orders where the men and horses were to go.

“ Oh, get them in that part of the shed, I'll have your vehicles unloaded with a gang of dock hands.” In a pleasanter voice he added, “ I'm worked off my feet,” and then he vanished as he had come. Within half an hour the train was empty and had departed. The men and horses were collected in one part of the great shed, while the vehicles, heavy with ammunition, had been run by dock hands to the quay side, and were being whisked into the air and dropped into the bowels of the great ship. Two horse brows, great gangways of wood, were hoisted, one forward and one aft, against the ship's side, and up these the horses were sent, to be packed into rough wooden stalls which had been prepared on the various decks.

At fixed intervals of time other troop trains arrived, and poured forth their living burdens, until the whole quay was congested with a mass of men, horses, and

vehicles. All through the day and far into the night the work of loading continued amid the shouts of men, the stamp of horses, and the hiss and rattle of winches and electric cranes.

In the small dark hours of Tuesday morning the transport stole slowly away from the ancient town of Southampton, which has so often witnessed the comings and goings of ships bearing the soldiers of England. In silence, a shadow among shadows, it moved with rhythmic throb down Southampton Water to the open sea, its steel masts pointing stiffly to the glory of the outspread heavens. Around lay the low and wooded shores of England, which seemed now to be peopled with the spirits of our past armies bidding us farewell.

Next morning my servant woke me with a heavy hand on my shoulder and a "Time to get up, sir ; party with an 'ose workin' this way."

I found myself stiff and sore lying in an alleyway, while about me were other pros-

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trate officers yawning and stretching and cursing at the hardness of the deck. Hearing the ominous swish of water I got up hurriedly and went to the upper deck, where around was an unbroken circle of calm waters with never a sign of another vessel. Thus alone, strangely alone, in perfect weather we crossed the Channel as if we were on a pleasure cruise, and it seemed impossible to realize that every pulse of the engines brought us nearer the battlefield of Nations.

Uneventfully the day passed, until about four o'clock amid a murmur of excitement we saw the coast of France, which gradually grew more and more distinct until we could distinguish the houses of Havre climbing up the cliffs and the great white building of the Casino. In the offing were anchored transport after transport heaving to the swell.

We waited some time for the tide and a pilot, and then as the sun was setting we glided through a lock into the vast docks of Havre.

As we passed through the lock, the quays on either side were crowded with French people cheering, crying, and waving handkerchiefs, and the troops lining the ship's side shouted and waved in reply. It was a wonderful moment, an historic moment, that first meeting of the English soldiery with the French people.

Two tugs towed us across the water to our berth, where on the wharf-side were a knot of French Territorial soldiers, bearded, middle-aged men dressed in little kepis, long dark blue coats looped back at the knees and red baggy trousers. They looked curiously at the sunburnt faces of the Tommies crammed along the ship's side, who in turn looked curiously at them.

Suddenly a voice shouted :

" 'Ave a cig, mate."

And a packet of Woodbines curved in the air and fell at the foot of one of the Frenchmen, who stooped and picked it up, saying, " Merci, Monsieur."

" 'Ear that langwidge," cried a Cockney delightedly.

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Then the spendthrift English showered down a storm of cigarettes mixed with biscuits, and the thrifty French pocketed the lot, crying out :

“Merci, Monsieur”—“Merci, Messieurs,” and wondering if the English were indeed mad.

The means of unloading were inadequate, for the French cranes were unable to lift the ammunition wagons and guns, so that all the vehicles had to be laboriously unshipped by winches and derricks on the ship itself. Besides this misfortune there was only one horse brow, and that was not in position until darkness had set in.

By the blue white light of sizzling arc lamps we toiled. The turmoil and confusion of the embarkation were repeated and augmented. Hour after hour passed and ever the noise of shouts, of commands, of stamping horses, and of rattling winches resounded along the wharf-side, and ever men hurried up and down the gangways or heaved at vehicles on the quay.

In the small hours of the morning, while

the busy uproar still continued, I felt my eyes grow heavy with sleep and my whole body ache with sheer fatigue. I knew if I sat down an instant I should fall asleep, so I kept mechanically at work, feeling as if I were in a nightmare and that the scene about me was but the vision of a distorted mind.

However, by seven o'clock next morning the disembarkation was complete, and we filed out of the docks, tired and unshaven, with our buttons dull and the steel work of the harness rusty from the sea air. Our orders were to go to a rest camp on some high ground above the town of Havre, so we rumbled through the tortuous cobbled streets, decorated with French and English flags and lined with women and children who rushed at the troops, imploring them for souvenirs. After ascending a steep hill we reached the rest camp, an open field with a few tents; here the horses were watered and fed and had their harness removed for the first time since leaving Bulford two days before. At eleven o'clock

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"stables" were over, and with a sigh of relief every one lay down and went sound asleep. In a couple of hours the Captain was sent for, and returned shortly with the news that we had to entrain that night, and our hopes of a rest vanished.

I was detailed to move on in advance to the place of entrainment known as "Point 1."

On my way I met battery after battery rumbling through the streets to different places of entrainment. The whole town seemed filled with the Royal Regiment of Artillery, moving to battle.

CHAPTER IV

THE CONCENTRATION

WHEN I arrived at "Point 1," I found myself in a dark wilderness of railway lines, where signal lights shone in the obscurity like coloured eyes. Slipping on rails, creeping under trucks, tripping over signal wires, I wandered vaguely about trying to find some one to report to, but without success. Various batteries were loading their vehicles and horses, and from time to time a troop-train would steam out and disappear into the night. For three hours I searched, till, at last, I discovered, in a little office which smelt of French tobacco and lamp-oil, a sleepy official who told me the exact place and hour of entrainment.

I returned to the main entrance of this railway wilderness and waited till mid-

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night, sitting on a kerbstone and feeling irritable, hungry, and exhausted.

At last I heard a familiar rumble of wheels, and the Captain at the head of the column appeared. Once more we began entraining, which in France was a far more laborious process than in England, because, owing to lack of platforms, the vehicles had to be pushed by hand from the ground up unwieldy wooden ramps on to the trucks. For the third night in succession the men, sleepy and tired, toiled at heavy ammunition wagons and struggled with obstinate horses.

By dawn the entrainment was complete, and as the men were hungry the quartermaster-sergeant began making some tea for their refreshment. The Captain asked a railway official when the train started, and was told 6.17. Suddenly, at six o'clock, without any warning, the train moved off, leaving all the personnel behind.

The situation, though desperate, was not without humour—every moment that passed took wagons and horses nearer the enemy

and left officers and men forlorn and helpless at the base. After a hurried consultation it was decided to explain our distress to the military railway staff.

So the Captain strode off at a great pace, followed respectfully by myself, until we eventually arrived before a charming French Colonel, who solved the problem by sending us on in another train carrying a field company. As we crowded in upon them, the sappers not unnaturally looked upon us very darkly.

The whole of that day, Thursday the 20th, as we rolled through the pleasant country, I thought how every road and railway of France was bearing hundreds of thousands of her soldiers to her eastern frontier, and how beyond that frontier the field-grey armies of the enemy were moving westwards like the march of Destiny. Nations in arms were face to face, awaiting the shock of battle which once again was to decide the fate of the world. Those days before the first conflict of the main armies were days of intense drama ; the

future lay before us like a mist, which we vainly tried to pierce with the darts of our hopes and fears.

About midnight we reached our destination, where we found our proper train waiting on a siding, and then, for the fourth night in succession, we toiled at the moving of wagons and horses.

About 7 a.m. on the morning of the 21st we left the place of detrainment, which was about fifteen miles to the southwest of Maubeuge, and moved to a village near the Forêt du Nouvion. The day was hot, and the march through the rich French country was full of beauty and interest. The men forgot their fatigue in their excitement at the unfamiliar scenes about them—the patter of the French tongue amused them; the strange country carts, the absence of hedges, the pruned trees, the cobbled roads, the shutters on the windows, the gendarme's uniform and the people's dress aroused their curiosity.

At every village we went through the inhabitants would flock into the streets,

begging for souvenirs. In many of them flags of the Allies decorated the windows and strips of cloth hung across the streets bearing such mottoes as "Welcome to the British."

About noon we halted in a village, where we lunched with the *Maire*, who, from the innermost recesses of his cellars, produced some perfect wines in which we drank to the success of the Allies. The coming of the British Army had convinced him that his home was in security, and that the enemy would be beaten back across their own frontier. Within a week he and his family were refugees, and Prussian officers, drunk with his own wines, were sprawling over his chairs and desecrating his homestead.

In the afternoon we received orders to move on at once to the village of Bettignies, a few miles beyond Maubeuge. We had already marched twelve miles in the morning, and this order meant a further march of over twenty, with the men exhausted from work and lack of sleep and the im-

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pressed horses still soft and commencing to gall.

The sun was setting as we reached the old fortress town of Maubeuge, where the proximity of war was brought vividly home to us. We passed by forts surrounded by freshly erected hedges of barbed wire; we met French soldiers digging trenches, and we saw trees and houses levelled to the ground to form a field of fire. Twilight was fading when we rumbled over a great drawbridge, through a tunnel in the curtain of the ancient defences, into the heart of the old town, where thousands of French soldiers were moving about the streets or were crowded along the boulevards.

When we emerged on the far side of the town, night had fallen.

I was riding at the head of the column with the Captain when, suddenly, two shadows leaped from the roadside in front of us, two bayonets glittered, and a challenge rang out. It was a French sentry post. We explained who we were and moved on

up the straight *pavé* road to Bettignies, where we slept in an open field on sheaves of corn.

Next morning, Saturday, 22nd August, we were up before dawn. After the horses had been watered and fed, and the men had breakfasted off bully-beef and tea, the teams were hooked in the wagons and we moved to the starting-point, which was a cross-roads just beyond the Belgian frontier. Here we were to fall in with a column of all arms, which was to move in fighting formation on the town of Mons.

Being an ammunition column our place was in rear, and as we were early we saw the troops move by. There is something stirring in the passage of a regiment in close formation. The individual soldiers are absorbed into one corporate body, which is the incarnation of the spirit of that regiment. These battalions of the British Army had lived and fought for over two hundred years and bore on their colours battle honours won in every quarter

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of the globe, whose names sound like a trumpet-call in the ear of the British soldier.

I have seen Sordêt's Cavalry march through Inchy on the eve of Le Cateau ; I have seen the Iron Corps of France march through the square of Ypres ; I have seen the 1st Canadian Division marching to St. Julien before the gas attack ; I have seen Indian troops going into action for the first time on European soil ; I have seen the Australians on their way to the attack of Pozières ; but I have no remembrance to equal that of the old regiments of the "B.E.F." marching to the battle of Mons.

Soon we moved into our place in the long column of men and horses, and advanced steadily along the tree-lined road. The country on either hand was slightly undulating, was dotted with buildings and intersected in many places by hedges and fences of wire. It was rich, thickly populated, and ugly.

Once a humming in the sky made every

one stare upwards, where three of our aeroplanes were flying towards the enemy. Around I could see glimpses of moving troops and many small parties of cavalry cantering busily and inquiringly about the countryside. Once a cavalry patrol which had been scouting in front passed us, and one of the troopers, with a grin, drew a sword, blooded to the hilt. The men were extraordinarily happy, laughing, joking, and asserting that the war would be over by Christmas.

In the afternoon we reached the suburbs of Mons. The fields gave place to streets of little brick houses, to big, gaunt factories and great dumps of slag. Men, women, and children, dressed for Mass, lined the roads to watch us pass, and many handed tumblers of beer to the hot and dusty soldiers.

That night we billeted in the suburb of Mesvin; the batteries were about the northern exits and the ammunition column in a brewery behind. The infantry took up and entrenched an outpost line along

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the bend of the canal to the east of Mons. As we went to sleep that night we knew that the morrow would see the first battle between Briton and German.

CHAPTER V

MONS

EARLY in the morning of Sunday, 23rd August, I awoke to find myself lying on the floor of the brewery office, with the Captain and the junior Sub. on either side. The morning was misty, and in the yard the men, with mess-tins in their hands, were crowding round the steaming camp-kettles in which the cooks were making tea. The owner of the brewery—a short and astonishingly stout Belgian—was walking anxiously about, trying to please the British and also trying to find out if they were damaging his property.

Leaving the column formed up in a large orchard, the Captain and I rode on through the suburb of Mesvin, where the people were looking with curiosity out of

their doors and windows, and reached the Artillery Brigade Headquarters at the northern end of the village. Here, in a clean, tiled room of a Belgian cottage, the Colonel explained the situation and issued orders to his battery commanders.

The conference being over, the batteries moved off to selected positions from which they could support the infantry. The drab lines of men and horses and guns wound across the meadowland with a clink of curb and stirrup and a flash of steel, disappearing into the wooded heights of Bois la Haut.

Farther to the north, but out of sight, the infantry crouched in their shelter trenches, dug in the soft loam soil of fields and orchards, now clothed in the luxuriance of jaded summer. Already the Middlesex had seen the field-grey forms of the enemy emerging from the houses and woods of Maisières. Already rifles had cracked and machine-guns stuttered, and already the first dead stiffened and paled in the grassland which borders the canal,

When the Colonel explained that we were to be on the defensive, a question, a doubt, arose in our minds. Why the defensive? The defensive measures of the previous night were ordinary and necessary military precautions, but the passive waiting on the 23rd was a different matter, the antithesis of all that we had expected and opposed to that teaching of the offensive which we had imbibed in the days of peace. Doubtless, in time the truth will be known, but whatever it may be the problem is well worth consideration.

At 10 a.m. I heard the first sounds of enemy shells bursting about Mons and the Nimy peninsula. At 11 a.m. the Captain and I rejoined the column, which was still drawn up in the orchard by the brewery. At about 11.30 a bicyclist orderly from the 8th Infantry Brigade Headquarters arrived, pouring with sweat, and held out a missive marked "Urgent." The Captain, tearing open the envelope, read the following: "Middlesex very hard pressed. Re-

quire S.A.A. at once." Immediately he sent forward four of the two-wheeled carts, which clattered up the road at a canter. The whole column then moved forward and formed up at close interval just north of Mesvin, where we waited ready to supply ammunition to infantry and artillery.

To our left front was the open slope of Mount Erebus, beyond which we could see the towers and chimneys of Mons; to our front was the village of Hyon; and to our right front the wooded whale-back hill of Bois la Haut.

The Captain, the junior Sub., and I were sitting together listening to the increasing sound of battle and wondering what was happening, when a dogcart, carrying two men in civilian clothes, swung into the field and drew up before us with a jerk. The driver leaned forward and spoke in broken English, in quick, decisive tones.

"I am Belgian. I live over there. It is terrible, terrible, for the English run away. There are horses without riders,

who gallop always. There are men without rifles, who run and cry ! ”

These statements angered us. The Captain spoke to him roughly, at which the stranger moved off a little. Suddenly he whipped up his horse and was down the road, towards Bois la Haut, at a tremendous pace. As he went the truth flashed on us—the man was a spy.

It was now past noon, and the noise of firing had grown in volume. From the direction of Mons came the sound of heavy explosions, from in front a continuous mutter and thundering, while on the right shells burst with a continuous roar on the northern end of Bois la Haut, forming a thick, yellow-green curtain of smoke.

About this time, the first German aeroplane sailed over our lines, flying at about two thousand feet. I could distinctly see its peculiar bird-like shape and the black cross beneath its wings. At that time, owing to the parsimony of the Government, the Army had no anti-aircraft guns, and consequently the flight of

the Taube was unhindered, save by a popple of musketry which it disdained to notice.

The clatter of hoofs and shouting turned our attention from the aeroplane to the entrance of the field, where the S.A.A. carts were returning empty. The horses were blowing hard and beginning to sweat, and the N.C.O. in charge, approaching the Captain in an excited manner, said :

“Infantry want more ammunition at once, sir. Say they want all you can spare.”

“All right, corporal,” and, turning to me, the Captain went on : “Fill up these empties from the G.S. wagons, and take them and the remainder of the S.A.A. carts up to the infantry. I must try and get some more ammunition from the Divisional Column, though no one has an idea where they are.”

In a quarter of an hour, I was trotting quickly down the road to Hyon, with a string of carts bumping and rattling behind me. On my left was the low spur of Mount Erebus, where a number of

sappers were digging trenches, and I wondered what this might mean.

We passed down a street with tram-lines on one side and electric standards at regular intervals. At the windows of the houses on either side scared faces appeared and vanished like ghosts. A turn in the road brought us into the village square, which presented an excited scene. Across the roads leading out of the square, on the north side, soldiers in shirt sleeves were digging trenches and erecting barricades of carts and stones and rubble ; near the working soldiers were rifles and bandoliers of ammunition, so that in a moment the growing defences could be manned with armed men ; in the centre of the square were gathered the horses and vehicles of the Brigade Ammunition Reserve, and of the Brigade Signal Section ; on the far side of the square was the *Mairie*, where through open windows the Infantry Brigade Staff could be seen hard at work amid maps, papers, and telephones ; just outside, standing in the

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square, was the Brigadier and his Brigade Major, while overhead the sun beat fiercely down on this scene of war.

Two or three messages were given to the Infantry Brigadier, and they seemed to cause him anxiety.

“ We must have more artillery support,” he said ; and then, with a sigh of relief, he added, “ Here’s Wing ! ”

Into the square at a sharp trot, swung Brigadier-General F. Wing, the Divisional Artillery Commander.

His air and expression of imperturbable confidence affected every one about him and was more comforting than the arrival of a Brigade of Guards. For a few moments he was engaged in earnest conversation with the Infantry Brigadier, and then, with a clatter of hoofs, he was gone.

About 2.30 p.m. I was back again with the column, and no sooner had I arrived than I was sent forward with four wagons of ammunition for the 23rd Battery, which was on Bois la Haut. We moved across a couple of meadows and up a road, which

skirts the left flank of the hill. Coming down this road were three horse ambulances crammed with wounded men, dusty and torn and swathed in blood-soaked bandages and looking straight before them, with staring eyes. Around the ambulances were a dishevelled crowd of limping men, for whom no room could be found. And as this company of suffering humanity moved slowly by they left behind them on the white and dusty Belgian road a scarlet trail of English blood.

Suddenly I heard a whistling in the air, which grew to the shriek of a soul in torment, and ended in a terrific double crash, and a hundred yards to my left there appeared two oily yellow clouds of smoke.

“Shells!” I said, rather stupidly, and I felt as if an ice-cold hand had touched me in the midriff.

To reach the battery it was necessary to go to the northern end of the hill and then to follow a rough track which doubled back to the crest in rear.

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Leaving the road, we swung at a trot through a gate on the right and up a sandy track. On the left, fifty yards away, were trees and undergrowth where shells were bursting continuously. The noise and concussion of the explosions were terrific; trunks, branches, and leaves were cut down, and splinters and bullets struck the ground about us with deadly smacks. Men by ones and twos were trickling back from the wood, and all of them looked shaken and weary. One little man presented a most pathetic figure—his cap was lost, his face was drawn with pain, his uniform was covered with dust and earth, his putties were half undone, and with his right arm he supported a bleeding and shattered left.

Soon we turned again to our right, and trotted quickly to the higher south-eastern part of the hill. Here, sheltering alongside a copse, I found the battery wagon line, while two hundred yards away was the battery in a clearing among the woods. As the ammunition was wanted at once,

I took my wagons direct to the gun position. The six guns, each with an ammunition wagon alongside, lay in line just below the crest ; the detachments were grouped about each piece ; the muzzles of the guns were lifted towards the enemy, and on the ground were heaps of empty brass cartridges which flashed in the sunlight.

Thin insulated wire snaked through the grass, connecting the battery to the observation post, where the Major controlled and directed the fire of the guns. It might have been a scene at manœuvres, except that many of the men bore an expression of strained expectation, that, in the turf around, were a number of freshly made conical holes, and that one of the wagons was smashed and twisted.

While my wagons were being unloaded, I spoke to the Captain, who said, " It's quite quiet now, but they have been shelling us periodically ; luckily, they have not done much damage."

As we were talking, a number of Gordon Highlanders doubled across the crest in

front, drawing a fierce crackle of musketry from the hidden enemy in the trees below.

When the wagons were unloaded, instead of returning by the sandy track up which I had come, I retired by a sunken lane, which zigzagged down the rear face of the hill. When I reached the Hyon-Mesvin road I found it blocked by columns of infantry marching towards the rear, and with a feeling of anxiety I realized that all was not well.

I waited for a gap in the passing stream of men, and then thrust my four wagons into it, and joined the moving throng. At about five in the afternoon I rejoined the ammunition column, which, in my absence, had moved from the meadow to behind a row of houses a couple of hundred yards in rear. The sergeant-major graphically and fiercely described the reason of the move—salvos of enemy shells which burst in the middle of the men and horses.

The stream of retiring infantry passed by and disappeared; the sun sank nearer the horizon; the enemy shell-fire, though

far less intense, crept closer and closer while we waited, patiently and anxiously, without orders and without the least idea of what was happening.

Suddenly there came into view on the road in front a figure on a bicycle, bending low and pedalling furiously, who flashed by us shouting, "Pretty warm down there!" and holding out his right hand, which was covered with blood.

At last the Brigade Major of Artillery appeared, and told us we were to retire towards Nouvelles; accordingly we went back along the street of Mesvin, up which we had advanced in the morning, when each window and door had framed smiling faces of men, women, and children, who now cowered for shelter in cellars beneath the ground. At the end of this street a railway crossed the road by a bridge, which was guarded by a detachment of soldiers with a machine-gun. Passing under the bridge we turned up a by-road to our left, crossed a low hill, where a battery was in action, and descended into

a hollow by the village of Nouvelles. Here we parked, and by the time the horses had been watered and fed it was dusk.

About eight o'clock we were joined by a battery of the Brigade, who, like ourselves, were without orders and without any knowledge of what was happening. After a hurried consultation between the two Captains—the Major of the battery had been killed—it was decided to send out search parties to locate Brigade Headquarters, and in consequence I found myself stumbling and groping through the obscurity of an exceedingly dark night. For an hour or more I wandered fruitlessly about the strange country. Once I ran into an unknown battery, where an electric torch was flashed suddenly in my face, and a voice demanded harshly who I was. Once I was stopped at the point of a bayonet by a picket on a road. Occasionally I met straying groups of men who had lost themselves in the retirement, and were now trying to rejoin their units.

One of these small batches—a dozen

men or so of the 4th Middlesex—I stopped and interrogated. Directly I spoke to them they came crowding round me and formed a circle of sombre figures and faces luminous in the darkness, saying that they were lost, relating their terrible experiences and asking what they should do.

“We was cut up, we was; proper cut up,” said one. “In the mornin’ the Germans started shelling us, lying in a trench we ’ad dug. The fire got ’otter and ’otter, and men were killed and wounded, and Gawd He knows why we was not, too!”

“Yus,” put in another Cockney—“Nobby Clarke was ’it in the ’ead and fell dead at my feet, and Ginger, my chum, what ’listed same day as me, was blowed to pieces, and spattered me wiv ’is blood. Oh, sir, ’twas awful!”

The first speaker went on: “And the Colonel, he walked up and down, as cool as anythink, just like on manoeuvres. Then the Germans appeared like a football crowd coming from the woods beyond the canal, and we let drive rapid fire, and what

wasn't 'it went back, and then the shelling got worse, till at last we were ordered to retire, and in the darkness and confusion we got lost. Cut up proper, we was."

I gave them such advice as I could, and the knot of men, weary and footsore, shuffled off into the gloom, and the last of them was a plaintive chorus, shouting, "Owld soljers never die—simply fide away!"

I returned, unsuccessful in my mission, and as we were without orders and within a few hundred yards of the infantry outposts, it was decided to move back a mile or so and bivouac where we could.

In the darkness, stabbed by flashes of light from an electric torch, and amid the imprecations of exasperated men, the horses and vehicles filed out of the meadow down a lane and on to the *pavé* highroad up which we had marched so confidently the day before. Back along this road, towards Maubeuge, we rumbled, until we reached a cross-roads, where there was a jam of traffic. Here at one corner was an

estaminet, from whose windows warm rays of light pierced the darkness and illuminated, with strange vividness, the passing forms of cloaked soldiers and steaming horses.

A motor-cyclist dispatch-rider throbbed through the night, drew up at the estaminet and knocked at the door, which was opened. Framed by the doorway and the darkness of the night, I saw a brightly lit room, with a tiled floor, a black-leaded stove in one corner and a few gaudy prints upon the walls. Down the middle of this room ran an oil-clothed table, where a large map was outspread, and about this table engaged in earnest conversation were a General and two Staff Officers. The light of the lamp was reflected in splashes of colour from gorgets and medal ribbons, and accentuated the furrows of thought that lined their foreheads. Suddenly the door closed, shutting out this picture, but the remembrance of those earnest faces will always remain.

It was now nearing midnight, so, pulling

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off the road into a field of stubble, we tethered the horses and lay down in our coats upon the ground to snatch what sleep we could before the dawn. The fatigues and excitements of the day, the hardness of the earth and the cold of the night, prevented sleep, and, as I lay uneasily awake, I saw to the northward the dull red glow of burning villages and heard an occasional mutter of musketry in the otherwise ominous quiet of the night.

CHAPTER VI

AUGUST 24

BEFORE dawn we were up and astir, watering and feeding the horses and preparing tea for the men's breakfasts. Every one was dirty and dull-eyed, while the horses' coats were caked with dried sweat and dust.

It was imperative to do two things—first, to find the Divisional Ammunition Column, so that we might replenish the empty wagons, and, second, to discover the whereabouts of the Brigade, who might be in need of ammunition. To this end, I was sent to Divisional Artillery Headquarters, which were near Frameries, to get what information I could. On my return the battle was starting afresh, and from a swell of ground about half a mile to the east of the village of Noirchain, I

stopped and looked at the battleground, which was spread before me. To the left were the pyramidical slag-heaps, the tall chimneys and the houses of Frameries; to the right the double row of trees, which bordered the main *chaussée*; to the front undulating fields of roots and stubble intersected by roads and railways and dotted with trees and houses; while in the distance showed the tops of the buildings of Mons. Everywhere I could see little figures moving hither and thither, while here and there were rows of toy batteries, served by toy soldiers. The whole scene scintillated with the flashes of our guns and was dappled by the white puffs of enemy shrapnel.

When I rejoined the column I found that the batteries of the Brigade had arrived and were taking up positions on the ground where we had spent the night, and that on all sides foot and guns were retiring and that the toy soldiers were growing each instant into men. During the morning the troops gradually retreated by successive

stages to a line running through Quévy-le-Petit, which was reached about eleven o'clock. On our immediate front there was no great pressure, but we could hear heavy firing from the direction of Frameries and Paturages, while somewhere about noon the sound of gunfire broke out on our right, and a rumour got about that the First Corps were attacking.

On reaching Quévy-le-Petit we found a battalion of Guards entrenching in the root fields and orchards on the outskirts of the village, and this was the first indication of the diagonal movement of the retreat. We rumbled through the narrow and tortuous streets of the village, which was pulsing with heat and filled with moving troops, and we halted along a lane on the south side.

Many of the inhabitants had fled, but numbers still remained, and some of these, strange to say, were calmly carrying on with their daily work as if nothing unusual was in progress.

The batteries had now again come into

action and needed ammunition. Whilst taking a couple of wagons to one of them, I met the 1st Battalion of the Gordons marching into the village. Owing to the narrowness of the road and to the crush of troops, I was obliged to stop until the battalion had marched by. With interest and admiration I watched these Scottish soldiers tramp past in the swirling dust, big-boned, brawny men, with faces brick-red from exertion and heat and with tunics unbuttoned at the neck. In front of me was a Staff Officer in a car, who was also held up by the jam of traffic. As the Gordons passed, he said, "Jove, they're magnificent! I'd give a fortune to see them get into the enemy with the bayonet!" Little did we know the strange fate the next few days held for these men.

Soon the batteries about the village began firing, and the enemy to reply. One of the first shells crashed into the church tower just above the place where I was standing, bringing down a shower of

bricks and dust and drilling a two-foot hole in the northern wall.

About one o'clock we continued our retirement and moved down a narrow road, with meadowland on either hand. Near Quévy Station we halted to water the horses. Just off the road was an exotic little villa with green shutters and a miniature turret. About the entrance was a pile of luggage and a forlorn group of people—a child, a servant, and a middle-aged couple, who were talking furiously. When they saw me they beckoned, so I approached, to find out what was the matter.

“Monsieur,” cried the man, “can you tell me if it is safe to stay? Every one else is flying, and there are rumours that the British are retreating and that the Germans are advancing in masses. Is it true?”

“We are retreating,” I said bitterly; “I advise you to leave at once.”

The woman clasped her hands, and said, “How can I leave this, which is

our home, our all? ” And she burst into tears.

The child ran to her mother and buried her face in her lap.

“ Oh, mamma, mamma, they told me this morning that the Germans cut off little children’s hands. Oh, save me, mamma, and don’t let them cut off my hands ! ”

The man clenched his fists and shook them at the enemy. “ We must go ! ” he cried. “ We must go ! God knows what will happen to our home.”

Shortly after this incident, the head of the column took a wrong turn and went down a narrow lane which ended in a cul-de-sac. As other troops were pressing on behind, the remainder went on, and I was left to extricate the half-dozen small-arm carts which were caught in the cul-de-sac. Owing to the narrowness of the track, it was necessary to man-handle each vehicle backwards out of the lane, and when, after great exertions, this was done, I found that the rest of the column had

completely disappeared from view and that the road down which we had to go was filled with a dense stream of moving infantry. To cut into a column of troops on the march is a military offence ; this I knew well, but as I was getting left farther and farther behind, and as it was imperative for me to get on, I twice attempted to slip into the stream of passing troops, but each attempt was fiercely repulsed by irate officers, so, dismounting, I waited philosophically for the tail of the column, which consisted of a number of cyclists, strung out to an inordinate length.

At last they were past, and I was just moving in behind them when, in a cloud of dust and with a clatter of hoofs, a troop of cavalry appeared. The subaltern in charge shouted to me :

“ Hello ! What on earth are you doing here with those wagons ? ”

“ Trying to get away ! ” I replied.

“ Man alive, hurry up ! This is the end of the army ! ”

“What?” I queried.

“That’s the truth; as far as I know there **is** no one between us and the enemy.”

At these words I felt a sudden and unpleasant internal commotion and I gazed hurriedly and anxiously towards the north, expecting to see sinister grey forms peering from behind bushes and trees, but I could see no living thing. Not only could I see nothing of war, but I could hear nothing. All sounds of strife had died away and the earth seemed to be at peace.

“Well,” I said, “I’m not waiting to prove your statement. So long!” And my half-dozen wagons were soon away, bumping and clattering down the road.

We caught up and passed the infantry, who had blocked our road and who were now taking up a position about a little village just to the south of Aulnois.

Soon we entered the Bois de la Lanière, and were moving down a straight road, which cut like a sword blade through the centre of the still forest. At regular intervals along the edge of this road and

half hidden in the undergrowth were pickets of French soldiers, whose blue coats, red trousers, and long black rifles looked strange and picturesque after the dull drab of the British troops.

At the end of the wood was a cross-roads, and here, as I passed, were two officers of high rank, talking most earnestly together. The one was a Frenchman, decorated with crosses, dressed in sky-blue tunic, cherry-coloured breeches, and shining black top-boots; the other an Englishman in khaki, with a flaring line of medal ribbon. Their conversation finished, they saluted and departed, the Englishman in a Rolls-Royce, the Frenchman in a big-bonneted grey car, which tore down the road towards Maubeuge, with the noise of a machine-gun.

We arrived at Bavai about 6 p.m., and here was a scene of the greatest confusion. By all the roads which led into the town, from the north and west, transport and troops and civilians were pouring in, to form in the square a jam of traffic. Here were gathered together horse-ambulances

crammed with wounded, ammunition wagons, general service wagons, infantry transport, motor-lorries, guns, infantry, country carts, gigs, cattle, and refugees, men, women, and children, who were flying before the invaders.

With difficulty I made my way through the town, and, to my great relief, I met and joined up with the remainder of the column on the far side. According to instructions, received from a Staff Officer whom we met on the road, we marched on to St. Waast, where we bivouacked for the night in a field. Round about us were resting thousands of tired men and horses, whose proximity one seemed to feel in some strange way, and in an even stranger way one felt the presence of the enemy, who in their tens of thousands lay like an evil tide but a few miles to the northward.

There were rumours current that night that the army was to fight on the morrow ; but late in the evening orders arrived that we were to move at break of day.

CHAPTER VII

AUGUST 25

I AWOKE to the sound of the sergeant-major's whistle, and I looked about me over the top of the dew-soaked blanket. Near by the servants were gathered about a wood fire on which a camp-kettle was boiling; farther on, down the middle of the field, I could see in the mist of the dawn the dim shapes of men and horses and could hear the continuous murmur of movement and the occasional shout of a man or whinny of a horse.

Soon the teams were hooked into their vehicles, the wagons were packed with camp-kettles, picketing ropes, blankets, and other articles, and with a rumble and a rattle we were once more on the road, retreating before the enemy.

At Bermeries we reached a main road down which a stream of troops, foot and guns, were moving. The infantry looked weary, many were limping and footsore, and all were dirty and bristly with a stubble of beard.

Not being able to find either Brigade Headquarters or any of the batteries, we joined the moving throng and marched slowly down the road. Owing to the confusion, to the number of troops, and to continual checks, the pace was very slow and tiresome. At a cross-roads in the village of Amfroipret, there was a Staff Officer, who was directing and encouraging the troops as they flowed slowly along the dusty road. From him we learned that we were to retreat by Wagnies-le-Petit, Le Quesnoy, Romeries, and Solesmes, and so in accordance with these instructions we left the main road and took a lane which led to the first of these places.

After leaving Amfroipret we met no one. The farther we went the more deserted the countryside appeared, until when near-

ing the village of Wargnies-le-Petit, the Captain and I, at the head of the column, turned a corner and met a cavalry patrol who were peering intently up a ride in a beech-wood which bordered the road.

“Who are you?” queried the cavalry Subaltern.

“Ammunition column,” answered the Captain.

“Well, you had better hurry, sir. This is the cavalry outpost line. I’ve just withdrawn to this spot from farther north, where we were in touch with the enemy, who can’t be so very far away now.”

At these words, the Captain gave the order to trot, and the long line of horses and vehicles bumped and clattered down the road, raising such a cloud of dust and making such a noise that I imagined a hundred enemy glasses turned in our direction.

We entered the village of Wargnies-le-Petit about 9 a.m., and here caught up with a battalion, whose Colonel looked at us in surprise through an eyeglass,

and succinctly and pithily pointed out that his regiment was forming a rearguard, that we were behind that rearguard, and the sooner we got forward the better for all concerned.

We pushed on in front of the infantry as fast as we could, but our best pace was no quicker than a walk, as the track became heavy and sandy and the horses were exhausted. Occasionally a team, sweating and panting, would stop dead and could only be got along by hooking in outriders and by putting men to heave at the wheels. Every now and then one would look to the north-west across the rolling fields in the expectation of seeing signs of the enemy, but the whole landscape was still and void.

At length we reached the old fort of Le Quesnoy, and got on to the broad, straight highroad where a number of motor-lorries were drawn up, from which white-bandaged wounded were being hurriedly unloaded and laid in a pitiable row along the dusty roadside. R.A.M.C. orderlies, directed by

a doctor, carried them to a hospital train which was waiting on a railway track hard by. Pieces of bandages and blood-soaked gauze and filthy rags of khaki cloth littered the road and a faint smell of iodoform hung in the air.

We continued our march uneventfully via Beaudignies and Romeries to Solesmes, with periodical halts to water and feed the horses. As we moved south the road became congested with civilians fleeing before the foe. There were powerful white horses pulling at four-wheeled country carts which groaned and creaked under huge loads of household gods on top of which squatted sorrowful groups of women and children. There were small two-wheeled vehicles crammed to overflowing with such things as tin boxes, clocks, coffee-pots, and striped mattresses. There were barrows pushed by men and quaint little carts drawn by yelping yellow dogs. There were hundreds of pedestrians—men, women, and children—tramping fearfully along in the dust and heat. There were

old, white-haired grandparents doddering feebly forward and little children crying and clutching at their mothers' skirts. There were young girls, with fear in their eyes, limping along with bruised and bleeding feet. And behind them they left their empty homes, with fires burning in the stove and with tables still laid for the midday meal; left them with all their private and sacred treasures to be desolated and desecrated by the licentious and brutal soldiery of Prussia, who swarmed forward, battalion by battalion, battery by battery, down every road and lane which led across the border into the heart of France.

These poor people whom we had come to protect and save, and who but a couple of days before had welcomed us as deliverers, now looked at us askance with reproachful eyes.

The bitterest incident of all was when, passing through a little village, we trod underfoot a strip of cloth which had hung in greeting across the street and which

bore the words : " Welcome to our saviours, the British ! "

In the sweltering heat of the early afternoon we climbed up a steep hill from the valley of the Selle to Viesly Village. On reaching the crest we saw to our surprise a number of British batteries in action about a thousand yards away to the north-west. While we were wondering about and discussing their identity, we met some artillery wagons under an officer, who told us that they were the 4th Division, just arrived from detraining, and now in position to cover the retreat. This news was most comforting and, combined with the rumour that the French were sending help, made every one quite optimistic.

We halted in the village for a quarter of an hour's rest, and having received instructions from a Staff Officer that we were to billet for the night in Caudry, we continued our march to that place. While the ammunition column went by the direct route, I, with an orderly, made a

detour round by Inchy to see if I could get in touch with the remainder of the Brigade, whom we had not seen at all during the day.

On the morrow over the country which I now traversed the German batteries came into action, and the German infantry deployed and advanced against our right flank between Troisvilles and Le Cateau, so that it may be of interest to describe it in some detail. Here begins the great chalk plateau of north-eastern France. The terrain is neither flat nor hilly. It forms, rather, billows or swells of land, intersected by decided valleys which are covered ways of approach or positions for the concealment of guns and reserves. The country is open, without hedges or walls, or scattered trees, or single houses. Nothing impedes movement except occasional fences of wire. Dotted over the countryside are a number of small villages of well-built stone houses clustering round a central cobbled square and grey church, while here and there are compact woods

of beech and fir. Numerous roads run in all directions, the main ones being straight, paved and lined by magnificent pollarded trees. Where the roads cross the crests of the billows of land they are often sunk a foot or two below the ground, forming a broad, shallow trench which would give a certain amount of cover to infantry. Nearly all the land is under corn, which at this time was cut, and either stood in stooks or was packed in circular ricks. Occasional fields of beet and clover made chequers of green in the sweeps of stubble, and in the valleys were meadows of lush grass.

I entered Inchy about 3 p.m., and as I did so rain began to fall in drenching torrents, which continued steadily until midnight. On reaching the great Cambrai Road I met, to my surprise, a long column of French cavalry and artillery moving slowly to the north-west. Both men and horses looked tired and exhausted, and in the pouring rain they presented a bedraggled appearance. The horses were

smaller, both in height and bone, than ours; they were thin and covered with mud and very many were galled, and yet, despite their exhaustion, their emaciation and miserable appearance, they pulled with the most astonishing power and vehemence, as if the spirit of France burned clear and fierce even within the animals.

I now saw, for the first time, the grey "soixante-quinze" of which I had heard so much. I thought I must be mistaken and that I was looking at a child's toy cannon; but I did not think so later on, when I witnessed this toy rapping out death at twenty rounds a minute, with perfect accuracy and precision.

The cavalrymen—cuirassiers, dragoons, hussars, and chasseurs—with their big curved sabres, their coloured tunics and breeches, their breast-plates and their steel helmets, from which hung long horse-hair tails, looked out of date and impractical, yet these troopers were of splendid physique, and the hundreds of

faces which passed by were virile, weather-beaten, and bearded. For the most part, the men were dark-eyed and black-haired, but here and there in striking contrast to his neighbour was a fair-haired, blue-eyed fellow. Once the column halted for a few minutes, and I spoke to a lieutenant of artillery. He told me they were Sordêt's Cavalry Division, that for days they had been moving up from the south by forced marches and they were going into billets somewhere near Cambrai.

“*Jour et nuit nous avons marché, marché à la bataille ;*”—with a gesture of his hands he indicated a horse in motion —“*et maintenant nous sommes fatigués, mais,*” he smiled a quick little smile and shook his fist towards the enemy, “*nous sommes tout prêts à nous battre.*”

Then the column moved on and he was gone.

I reached Caudry about 4.30 p.m., where I found the ammunition column and the rest of the Artillery Brigade. The village was swarming with troops moving into

billets, and more troops were still marching in. Those of the inhabitants who had not fled watched the British Tommies with interest, and the shops were doing a roaring trade in matches, chocolate, cigarettes, and tinned food of all sorts. Our billets for the night were in a brickyard to the east of the village, the wagons and horses were placed in a field near by, which, in the unceasing downpour, became a lake of sticky mud. Liquid mud covered men, horses, harness, and vehicles, adding to the general misery and shortening every one's temper. The Captain expressed himself very clearly to me ; I had a few words with the sergeant-major, the sergeant-major had many words with the sergeants, the sergeants yelled ferociously at the drivers, the drivers vented themselves on the horses, and the horses broke the picketing ropes and slipped their head-collars.

In the evening we dined in a hay-loft by the light of two candles, stuck in bottles, eating cold bully-beef, sardines, and ration

biscuits of a formidable hardness. We had not the least idea beyond our own immediate circle of action of what was happening ; a vague rumour was current that we should fight on the morrow, but, later on, orders arrived that the retreat was to be continued and that we were to start before daybreak.

We were all settled down in the hay, just going off to sleep, when a dripping orderly arrived with an urgent message from the infantry for ammunition, so I had to get up, put on my wet tunic and boots, sally forth and rouse the grumbling, sleepy drivers. Then at the head of three ammunition carts we groped slowly through the dark and dismal night, now missing the miry track, now slipping into a ditch, now running into other shadowy vehicles, until we arrived at the 8th Infantry Brigade Headquarters at Audencourt, where we dumped the heavy wooden boxes of ammunition in a courtyard. While the men were at work, heaving and lifting manfully and cheerfully, despite their being

wet to the skin and aching with fatigue, the Staff Captain came up and in the course of conversation said to me that the battalions of the Brigade were short of half their machine-guns and lacked entrenching tools.

When we went back the rain had ceased, the dark clouds had rolled away, the sky was clear and limpid, and the stillness of the night was broken only by the creak and suck of our wheels in the mud and the distant faint tramp of armed men.

CHAPTER VIII

LE CATEAU

BY 23rd August the I., II., and III. German Armies under Von Kluck, Von Bülow, and Von Hausen had forced back the Allied left wing. The Belgian Army had been isolated and thrust north within the protection of the forts of Antwerp. The 5th French Army under Lanrezac, which was deployed, part facing east along the Meuse, and part facing north along the Sambre, had suffered a defeat—Charleroi had fallen to Bülow, and the steel forts of Namur at the junction of the Sambre and Meuse had crumpled under the colossal blows of the heavy German howitzers. To the west of the 5th French Army were the British, who, although they had fought no decisive action, yet had been forced to retire in conformity

with their Ally. The direction of this retirement was to the south-west, to prevent Von Kluck from succeeding in his endeavour to outflank and drive the British Force within the fortress of Maubeuge.

Spread like a mighty cloth across the line of the British retreat was the forest of Mormal, which divided our two corps, the First Corps marching to the east and the Second Corps to the west of it.

By the evening of 25th August the situation was as follows:—The 1st and 2nd Divisions to the south-east of the forest of Mormal, separated by a gap of nearly ten miles from the 5th, 3rd, and 4th Divisions under General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, which, in this order, were aligned from Le Cateau by Caudry to near Haucourt, while echeloned some way off to the left rear were Sordêt's Cavalry Corps.

Orders to retire were issued in the evening to the troops; but, in the early hours of 26th August, General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien decided to stand and fight.

On the 26th August was fought the

battle of Le Cateau. On that day, from six in the morning until three in the afternoon, the three British Divisions withstood the assaults of eight German Divisions. For every British battalion the Germans had two and a half battalions, for every British battery the Germans had three batteries, and for every British machine-gun the Germans had nearly ten machine-guns, and yet the army of Von Kluck received a check so staggering that his threat of envelopment was warded off.

A fitting tribute is paid by the Commander-in-Chief in his first dispatch :

“ I cannot close the brief account of this glorious stand of the British troops without putting on record my deep appreciation of the valuable services rendered by General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien. I say without hesitation that the saving of the left wing of the Army under my command on the morning of the 26th August could never have been accomplished unless a commander of rare and unusual coolness, intrepidity, and determination had been present to personally conduct the operation.”

Before the sun had risen we were rumbling through Caudry to the south, according to the orders we had received the night before. At this time we had no idea that the Army was to fight, and we thought that the general retreat was to be continued. A white mist lay like a blanket over the ground, the earth was wet with the night's rain and the morning dew glistened everywhere.

We marched slowly and steadily without any untoward incident through Clary to Elincourt, which we reached about 9 a.m., and where we halted to water and feed the horses. There were other troops in the village—a squadron of cavalry, some cyclists, a few oddments of infantry, and a number of tramplike stragglers.

About this time we began to hear a thudding of guns to the north which grew in volume, and we asked each other what it meant.

Suddenly, while the horses were contentedly munching in their nosebags, an alarm flew like wildfire from lip to lip :

“Uhlans are coming !”

Every one who had arms seized them, officers fell in their men, and a queer little force of about fifty under a major moved out to meet the enemy ; but the alarm proved to be a mere rumour, apparently entirely groundless.

A mile or so farther on, drawn up in a field by a cross-roads, we met the Divisional Ammunition Column, and as we required ammunition we took the opportunity to replenish our wagons. While the long line of vehicles were halted along the road, and while the gunners, sweltering in the heat, stowed away round after round of shrapnel, a motor-car swung round a bend of the road and drew up with a shriek of brakes.

A Staff Officer of the Division got out, and, approaching the Captain, said, “ You must return at once and at top speed. We are not retiring to-day according to the original orders. It has been decided to stand and fight.”

Nosebags were whipped off the horses’

heads, limber lids were shut with a clang, amid curses and imprecations the wagons were reversed on the road, and, with every vehicle bumping and rattling, we trotted as fast as we could towards the sound of the guns, which every moment grew louder and louder. Owing to the distance we had to go and to the exhaustion of the horses, it was necessary to march by alternate periods of trotting and walking, but even so the horses were soon black with sweat and flecked with foam.

During this time a strong rumour was current that two or three French Divisions had arrived on the scene of action and were about to engage the enemy, who by our retreats of the previous two days had now been led into a strategical trap and was about to meet his doom—a comforting if an untrue statement of the situation.

During a short halt to allow the somewhat strung out vehicles to close up, I met and entered into conversation with a subaltern who was in charge of a party of about a dozen men. If I close my eyes I

can still see him—a tall, lean man with a face as brown as a berry, with uniform torn and soiled and with a fierce, drawn expression on his face—standing on the white road, while behind him were grouped his bearded soldiers. In a quick staccato manner he vented his wrath upon the Staff. The trials and privations he had undergone had so strained his nerves that he had to relieve the tension of his system by abusing some one, and as has been done so often and so unjustly he chose the Staff for the object of his vituperation.

“We’ve been marching and fighting and fighting and marching without food and without sleep for days till we’re about done. This is all of my platoon who are left. This morning I was sent as escort to some transport and just now a Staff Officer in a car appeared, eyeglass, red tabs, all complete. ‘Haw!’ he said, ‘just take your men back to so-and-so at once, please.’ And here I am on the tramp to death again. Well, c’est la guerre. So long.”

“Good luck,” I replied.

“Come on, lads,” he said to his men, who gave a hitch to their equipment and followed him with trustful eyes.

When we reached the village of Clary, the Captain sent me forward to see if I could discover the whereabouts of the batteries of the Brigade, for, having left them early in the morning, we had no idea of their present positions. The noise of firing had increased until the crash of guns and the explosions of bursting shell combined to form a deep throbbing volume of sound which rolled back and forth across the battlefield and beat monotonously on the senses. Topping the crest of a rise the whole scene of the struggle was suddenly spread in panorama before me.

In the foreground, tucked in a hollow, was the little village of Montigny, from whose church tower hung a Red Cross flag; beyond, the ground rose in a low ridge or swell of land on which were the villages of Beauvois, Caudry, Audencourt, Beaumont, with the tops of the houses of Troisvilles showing

on the right. Just behind these villages, running clean across the landscape and shutting out all further view, was the avenue of pollarded trees which marked the Cambrai Road and which looked like a gigantic green ruler, lying athwart the countryside.

The infantry were hastily entrenched along a line which connected up these villages and which was roughly parallel to and about a thousand yards from the great road. The crest of the ridge, however, hid them from my view; but, though the infantry were invisible, I could see our artillery, who presented a grand spectacle. On the southern slopes of the ridge, some fully and some partially concealed from the enemy, our batteries stretched in an irregular line from right to left. The guns and wagons and detachments stood dark and distinct, though diminished through distance to minute weapons and tiny figures. Every gun was firing, and countless flashes of light scintillated against the gold and green

sweep of country. The whole of the scene was flecked with the white and yellow smoke clouds of enemy shrapnel and high explosive, the nearer of which appeared tongued with cruel yellow flames. I could see the bursting shell smashing and crumpling the villages, sweeping the batteries with a hail of death and searching the valleys and hidden approaches.

And all the while the thunder of the guns rolled and reverberated in deep-toned waves of sound which spread and spread in ever-growing circles, striking the ear of many a distant listener and making him wonder what that sinister noise might forbode.

Passing through the streets of Montigny, which were crowded with infantry transport, I met on the far side a thin stream of wounded, some on stretchers, some supported by comrades, some staggering and hobbling along by themselves, and all making for the open door of the church, which had been turned into a dressing-

station. Inside, the stone floor had been covered by a thick layer of straw on which the forms of stricken humanity lay in rows, seeming in the dim light of the interior to look like the shadows of death. The faces of these men were drawn with pain and pale from exhaustion. Their clothes were torn and rent and stained with blood and dust. For the most part they lay still and silent, but some moved restlessly and moaned from time to time. At the far end of the church an image of Christ, showing white in the semi-obscurity, looked sadly down on the eternal suffering of the world.

Having no map and being unacquainted with the ground, I could only hope to find our Brigade by going straight forward and making inquiries. Leaving my horse, I continued my way on foot towards a large village, which I afterwards discovered to be Caudry. It must have been about 11.30 a.m. when I met some extended lines of infantry, who were advancing by rushes. I talked for a few moments to a subaltern

who was leading forward his platoon, and learnt from him that these troops were making a counter-attack against the village in front (Caudry), part of which had been captured by the enemy.

Further search showed that our Brigade was not in this vicinity, so I returned through Montigny. On my way there was a sudden outburst of musketry close by, and looking up I saw a Taube humming serenely along at about five hundred feet. Every one who could lay hands on a rifle blazed away but without any apparent effect.

I found the column drawn up along a road just west of Bertry. In my absence they had found the Brigade, which was in action near Audencourt, and had already sent ammunition up to the batteries.

About one o'clock the firing on either side died away, and a strange and ominous quiet brooded over the battlefield. Every one remarked about this lull and wondered what it meant. It continued for half an hour or more, and was then broken by a

throbbing fire which once more covered the countryside with thousands of white balls of smoke and tongues of fire. We felt that the fight was approaching a crisis.

Up to this time every one had been fairly confident as to the issue, but now dark rumours were circulating that all was not well and that the right flank at Le Cateau was being overwhelmed and beginning to give way. The rumours multiplied, and stragglers began to appear and pass by. Suddenly about 3 p.m. a Staff Officer, mounted on a horse whose nostrils were dilated with exertion, cantered hard up the road, drew rein, and leaning forward in his saddle spoke to the Captain in a tense voice.

“The right has gone—we’ve got to retire. Take your column back at once. The road is Clary—Elincourt—Malincourt—Beaurevoir.”

“Clary—Elincourt—Malincourt—Beaurevoir,” he repeated, and then clapping his spurs to his horse he was away down the road to warn others,

At these words something seemed to happen along the whole front. Down every road, far and near, which had been white and nearly deserted there now appeared dark streams of troops, moving southwards. The wall of flesh and blood which had barred the way to the enemy for so many hours began to crumble and disappear. The hopes of victory so fondly entertained vanished at a word, and we tasted once again the bitterness and ignominy of retreat.

We reached Clary to find it blocked by troops—men, horses, and vehicles of different units and formations, all striving to gain the southern exit of the village. After a struggle we got the column through the village on to the road which led to Elincourt and which was now covered with a confused stream of men and horses.

Slowly and with many a check we marched until as evening fell we entered Beaurevoir. On our way, near Malincourt, I saw drawn up on some fields to the north

of the village a mass of cavalry and horse artillery standing still and motionless with the slanting rays of the setting sun reflected in a thousand flashing points of light from sabre-hilt and lance-head. As I watched, the whole body started into motion, advanced in close order towards the enemy, deployed and disappeared.

In the dusk which was darkening into the blackness of night, we drew up our seemingly endless numbers of horses and vehicles along the narrow cobbled streets, watched by kindly peasants who brought delicious black coffee in china bowls and who asked us anxiously if the Germans were coming. We gave the horses the last feed of oats and hay that we carried, and soon you could hear running up and down the shadowy lines of patient teams the munch of jaws, and the gentle rattle of corn in nosebags. The gunners and drivers sat by their teams eating bully-beef with jack-knives and drinking alternately from bowls of coffee and mess-tins of sweet black tea,

There were troops in the village when we arrived, and since our arrival more had poured in, until the quaint streets which for so many years had only echoed to the creak of the country wain, now resounded to the tramp of a foreign soldiery and the rumble of the weapons of war.

Not knowing where our Brigade Headquarters were located, we sent out orderlies to find them, and we waited patiently for further instructions.

Night had now fallen, and with it came sleep in the form of an insidious coma which stupefied man and beast. The horses in their teams stood motionless, some with heads hung down, some with heads rested pathetically on wagons or on neighbour's backs, while on the ground beside them the drivers snored in utter oblivion. But while the men snatched a few minutes' sleep, the Captain and I had to keep awake to be ready for the orders which we momentarily expected. And now began a terrible fight against sleep,

which lasted throughout the night. It seemed as if a subtle and soporific poison had been injected into my veins, which dulled my senses, numbed my limbs, and drew my eyelids together with deadly power; to stave off its effects I was obliged to walk up and down though every bone of me ached with fatigue and clamoured for rest. About eleven the orderlies returned to say that their search had been fruitless, so the Captain sent me to report and get instructions from an Infantry Brigade Headquarters which we knew were in the village. I stumbled up the dark street dotted with motionless sleeping forms, until I reached the estaminet where the Brigade Headquarters were situated. I entered. In the room, which was dimly lit by candles, were the General and his Staff all fast asleep except one officer, I believe the Brigade Major, who was swaying over a map. On inquiry he told me in a voice thick with sleep that all units were to move on St. Quentin, and that our ammunition column should leave the village

at midnight and would be directed by a guide.

With this information I returned to the Captain, who ordered the sergeant-major to fall in the men, and by midnight we were once more on the move. Of the rest of this night I have no clear recollection ; it remains in my mind as a blurred nightmare, in which shadowy figures slept as they rode or slept as they walked, in which phantom teams halted in sleep, checking for miles a ghostly stream of men and in which the will to move ever wrestled and strove with the desire to sleep.

As the dawn broke, the light of day and the freshness of the morn somewhat dispelled our weariness and showed the exhausted multitude of soldiers staggering and stumbling along the highroad. By the wayside were scattered thousands of empty bully-beef tins, empty petrol tins, discarded packs, pieces of uniform, bandoliers and clips of cartridges ; occasionally one came upon a derelict vehicle or an

abandoned horse with galls like scarlet saucers on his back and sides, who stood still as a statue gazing at his masters passing by ; and here and there men who had given up the struggle lay asleep sprawled on the grass. Of the multitude who marched many were without caps or packs, and many were so footsore that their boots were soaked in blood and all without exception were dirty, bearded, and haggard.

About ten in the morning we entered the old town of St. Quentin, and as we marched through its streets we felt that the curtain had dropped on the first act of the Great War and that the doings of the last few days, though so close, had yet passed into the realms of history.

During these dark days I never heard a whisper of doubt as to the end. Of the final victory each one of us was assured. We felt ourselves to be but the lance-head of the British Empire, and that while we fought and retreated we were

but gaining time for the gathering of a greater Army who would come in their millions to carry the flag of victory over the bones which lie along the Cambrai Road.

CHAPTER IX

NOYON

FROM the village of Ham, the *route nationale* switchbacks due south in a succession of smooth curves which increase in steepness until, skirting a densely wooded series of heights, it finally descends into the cathedral town of Noyon, situated in the broad valley of the Oise.

Down this road on the 28th of August marched the Second Corps of the British Army. From the crest of one of the curves, looking forward or back, one could see the long column of troops moving slowly southwards and darkening the whiteness of the road.

Since the battle of Le Cateau, the pressure of the enemy had relaxed, and already battalions and batteries were re-

covering from the disintegration and confusion of the previous day.

Our ammunition column, in its appointed place, moved along with the other troops, halting at intervals to water and feed the horses and rest the men. Incidents of the last day's fighting passed from lip to lip as we marched along, or were told graphically as we rested in the shade of the great trees which lined the road. And these are some of the stories that I heard :

“ From our position on the top of the hill, we had a magnificent view away north and east into the heart of Belgium. On Sunday morning, as I scanned the landscape, it was empty except for a few dots moving here and there. And then *they* appeared like grey streams flowing ceaselessly down every road and lane—sheer immensity of numbers, moving forward as if without end. I tell you, that sight opened my eyes and made me realize their tremendous power.”

“ The Major chose us an A1 position in

a hollow, and they never found us throughout the day ; though most fellows say the shooting was poor, we got glorious targets—sort of thing one dreams about. The best of all was a battery—a whole live German battery—which suddenly appeared moving across a field in column at about four thousand yards. They must have thought themselves concealed, for they were coming into action at a walk, in a quite leisurely manner. I nearly shouted for joy when I saw the swine, and I noticed that the range-taker's hand was quivering with excitement as he manipulated the coincidence screw. The Major snapped out his orders, and the first two ranging rounds, 'three, nine—four, two,' bracketed them perfectly, just as they had moved into line and were dropping their trails. Our first two shells created a gobber amongst them, for I could see through my glass a fellow on a horse rushing up and down, waving his arm and apparently giving orders. But they didn't have much time for monkey tricks, for the Major

went straight to gunfire, which burst slap in the middle of the bunch. I saw the bloke on the horse crumple like a concertina, and then the outfit was hidden for a bit under a cloud of smoke, dust, and small stones. The Major repeated the dose, and I could see little dots scurrying about in the smoke-cloud, and teams and single horses galloping wildly away in every direction."

"The skipper was an expert in siting trenches—made it a sort of hobby in peace-time, and the one he made us dig was a model. I defy anyone to have seen it fifty yards off. He kept every one down in the trench and wouldn't let so much as a nose be shown above the parapet. The first thing we knew of the enemy was a whizz overhead and a bang behind us, and soon their guns were in full blast plastering the country. But luckily not a single shell came near us—everything was over—for they were knocking spots off a hedge a couple of hundred yards behind, where I suppose they thought we were. This

racket continued for half an hour or so, and then one of the concealed look-out men got very excited and beckoned to me. I crawled up the narrow trench and, as directed by the man, I looked through a sort of spy-hole between two turnips. There, creeping forward, about a thousand yards off, were a number of grey figures—no mistaking *them*. I went off to tell the skipper, but I found him already watching the enemy. The noise of firing had increased, our shrapnel was bursting in amongst them, and a rattle of rifles and machine-guns had broken out from the trenches on our right and left; but the skipper would not let a man show himself. We put extra clips in niches scooped in the parapet, and we waited. The grey scouts and skirmishers got nearer and nearer and were followed by line upon line of field-grey infantry. It was like standing on the seashore watching wave upon wave swelling up from the distance and advancing in endless succession towards one. Our guns and rifles were cutting them down in

swathes, but still they came on and on. Opposite us, as we were not firing, they advanced more quickly and formed a sort of bulge in their line. At four hundred yards, fixed sights, the skipper gave the order to let 'em have it. The men, full of beans and excitement, lined the parapet and poured in 'rapid' till the woodcases blistered with heat and their hands were bleeding from the continued jamming in of cartridge clips. Then the lines in front just disappeared. I cannot well describe it, but one moment there were rows of men advancing with superb courage and the next the dun-coloured fields were peppered with grey dots, some of which moved and wriggled from time to time."

"We could keep back their main forces with our rifle fire, but their snipers were damnable. They crawled up, unseen, quite close to us, and, cleverly hidden, they started picking off anyone who showed himself. They *could* shoot: one shot and always smash went a man's head."

“ Myself, a lance-corporal, and twenty men are all that are left of my platoon. M’own nerves are all to pieces. Look at my hand, still quivering like the tongue of a Jew’s harp, and every sudden sound or quick movement sets my heart racing like a fire-engine. And the astonishing thing is—I haven’t seen a German alive or dead.

“ In the morning I was told off to entrench and hold a bit of a hill some couple of hundred yards behind our front line—sort of *point d’appui*. Well, we dug the regulation three by three trench and sat in it, snug as bugs, so we thought. The country round appeared perfectly peaceful, with never a sign of the enemy.

“ I was talking to my sergeant when suddenly there was a rushing noise in the air like a flight of a gigantic partridge, and then came an appalling crash and an upheaval of earth and muck from a part of the trench about ten yards or so away. No ranging, mark you; the shell just arrived from out of the blue plumb into

the trench. I made my way to see what damage had been done, and found a grisly sight—Clarke, our star player in the battalion football team, and a jolly good fellow, was lying dead, split in half like a herring in a pool of smoking blood. That turned me up. I called my sergeant, and was giving him instructions to keep the men well down under cover—when whee-oo!—crash came another, and a jagged piece of steel the size of a soup-plate struck him on the side of the head and cut his face clean off. His body collapsed, and his face lay in the trench a yard off, bloodless and ghastly.

“Then started a perfect tornado of shell, raining on us from nowhere. The noise was stupefying and the whole place became a holocaust. Something seemed to snap inside my head, and I thought I was going mad. This hell on earth continued for two hours and then ceased. I suppose they must have thought they had wiped off every living thing on that hill—which, to all intents and purposes, they had done.”

“Funniest thing I’ve seen for a long time. I was with the wagon line, which was drawn up in a field under cover of a wood. There were a number of odd shells coming over, though nothing into us except a few splinters. The noise of the bursts was increased by the trees and made an astounding din. The drivers were quite happy, however, except one man who turned a pale sea-green and shut his eyes at every explosion. This wretched fellow soon became the butt of the others, who kept on cracking jokes at his expense, until at last one wag picked up a pebble and threw it at the man’s middle when he next shut his eyes. At the blow, the victim of the joke clapped his hands to his stomach and yelled out : ‘ ’It at last ! Oh, Gawd ! ’ at which the ribald onlookers fairly howled with glee.”

Just before entering the town of Noyon, the road from Ham forks into two branches. During this afternoon, standing in the angle of the bifurcation, was a blackboard,

on which was chalked in large letters, directions as to where the various Divisions III., IV., and V. were to go for billets for the night. I have often thought that this use of a school blackboard to disentangle the retreating troops was, in its way, a little masterpiece of Staff work, the outcome of a flash of genius. By no other means would it have been possible to give efficient directions to that moving medley of units from three Divisions. By the side of the blackboard stood a Staff Officer, who looked cheerfully through an eyeglass at the passing streams of men and horses, and who was ready to amplify the chalked directions.

Taking our instructions from the board, we took the right-hand branch of the fork and marched down a short, steep hill into the heart of the town of Noyon, whose twin cathedral towers stand majestically above the roofs of the clustering houses and above the thousand poplars which line the roads. The usual quiet of the place was now broken by the continuous and

thunder-like rumble of wheeled transport on the move, and everywhere soldiers of all ranks were busy settling into billets for the night.

For an army at war, the doings of the past or the happenings of the future are but of little moment. The past is the past where the acts of men are engraved eternally on the face of time, and the future—well, to-morrow you may be dead. And so the absorbing interest is the present: in the present you laugh and live and die.

So the phantom army, which not so many hours past had struggled in agony in the darkness and the grey of dawn towards St. Quentin, had vanished, and in its place was a very prosaic, a very materialistic army, squabbling for feather-beds, washing in public, shaving in strange places and stranger attitudes, carrying enormous bundles of straw, singing sentimental songs, drinking black tea and eating bully and biscuits.

Passing through the town we moved up

a broad, straight road, which crossed the Oise by a pier-and-girder bridge, until we reached a rather ragged collection of houses called Pointoise, which was our destination for this day. All around us in the low, flat meadow-land of the river were troops in bivouacs ; as far as you could see were lines of horses and wagons, with men in grey shirts moving busily amongst them, whilst every moment more units filed off the roadway to their allotted places. The smoke of a hundred camp-fires ascended in thin blue columns into the still evening air, while the clang of shoeing-smiths' hammers, the shouts of men, and the whinnies of many horses combined to form a monotone sound which struck drowsily on the ear.

Our own particular bivouac was situated in a meadow, bordered by a willow-lined stream. As the sun was setting we had settled down for the night ; the horses were busy over their evening feed ; the men were erecting little shelters with sticks and waterproof sheets ; the quartermaster-

sergeant was issuing rations, and the farrier was ministering to a horse with colic. Knut, the Captain's servant, who was cook and president of the small republic, formed by the three servants (a republic which was always in a state of continuous warfare with the sergeant-major and which carried out numerous predatory raids on the quartermaster's rations and on neighbouring fowl-houses), approached his master and said :

“ We've fixed up a billet for the officers in sort of a pub over the road, sir. We've found a couple of bottles of red wine—‘ving rooge’ they calls it here—and we've found some eggs and a chicken and a loaf of bread a yard long. So I think we shall be all right to-night, sir, in spite of them Germans.”

This last remark referred to the loss of our baggage-wagon which had broken down and had fallen into the hands of the enemy, with all our kits—a catastrophe which was not discovered until it was too late even to salve the luncheon basket.

After an excellent dinner, cooked and served by members of the independent republic, we went to sleep on beds of straw, which had been prepared on the floor in the shabby billiard-room of the inn.

The batteries of the Brigade were not in bivouac near us, but had passed the night on the high ground to the north of Noyon, where they were in readiness to support the infantry of their affiliated Infantry Brigade, who had taken up an outpost position covering the troops in the valley.

The next morning I was up before the sun, with orders to take six wagons of shrapnel to the batteries. At the head of my little column, I wound along a narrow, unmetalled road, on either side of which were countless forms, motionless in sleep and covered in waterproof sheets wet with dew. Half a mile brought us on to the broad highway, up which we rumbled in the stillness and quiet of the morning, with the sun rising above the

massive wooded heights, on the north side of the valley. Along each side of the main road, drawn well under the poplars, was a row of motor transports ; some were the regulation grey lorries, but the majority were impressed civilian vans, whose particular colours and flaring advertisements looked strangely familiar. The drivers and mechanics of these vehicles were beginning to rouse themselves from their night's sleep. Tousled, bristly faces appeared from dim interiors, from above dashboards, and even from between the rubbered wheels.

Passing through Noyon we reached the batteries about nine o'clock. The ammunition was handed over and the empty wagons sent back. I remained with the Brigade Headquarters in case any more ammunition was required.

The Colonel was just beginning his breakfast when the orderly officer rushed in and held out an envelope marked "Urgent."

"Mounted man just brought this in from the General, sir."

The Colonel opened and read the missive, and said : " We are to come into action at once to assist the infantry outpost line, for the enemy are pressing in our cavalry. Tell the batteries to harness up at once and send for the B.C.s to be here in half an hour to reconnoitre positions with me."

For the time being I was at a loose end, so I mounted my horse and cantered over the open fields, to see what was to be seen. I reached the main road about a mile to the north of Noyon, and there I met some regiments on the move who were advancing to support the outposts. I trotted on, passed some strange batteries coming into action, and eventually was halted by a subaltern in charge of two machine-guns, which were cunningly dug into the banks on either side of the road, and which had a field of fire down the white and deserted highway for a thousand yards.

" Hi ! " he said ; " you can't go any farther, or you will be in front of the line

we are holding. We expect the enemy will be in sight any moment. The cavalry are already being driven in. Hear that ? ”

I listened and heard a faint popple of rifle fire and the thudding of guns, but to the eye all was at peace. I then moved off to the left, through a wood, to rejoin the Brigade, which I soon found, the eighteen guns being in line below the crest of a low open ridge.

To the right of the guns and by a haystack on top of the crest was the observing station, where the Colonel and the battery commanders were grouped. They were in communication with the guns by telephone, so that fire could be opened at once on any suitable target that might appear.

Leaving my horse in a hollow, I reported myself to the Adjutant and sat down to watch developments. The ground in front sloped away, clear and open, for a thousand yards, until it met a wood behind which the held horses of the dismounted cavalry were sheltering. To the right of the wood ran a hedge, and along this a horse artillery

battery was in action, with its teams under cover of a fold of the ground five hundred yards to the rear. Beyond, through glasses, khaki figures could be seen in prone positions, waiting for the enemy.

The noise of musketry increased and the distant figures began working incessantly at their rifles; then the horse battery opened fire, and was soon flashing viciously. White bursts of enemy shrapnel whiffed along the firing line and cracked angrily over the wood, making the horses behind start and shiver uneasily. Away in the background could be seen intermittent points of light, which indicated the enemy guns.

The firing continued for half an hour or more, when some one said, "Look, they are moving back!" and, sure enough, the men were beginning to retire by rushes.

"There go the teams!" And at a canter the limbers swept up to the guns, hooked in, and the whole battery retired in line at full interval, with enemy shrapnel bursting over them. The dismounted

troopers reached their horses behind the wood, formed up, extended into line, and, bending low in their saddles, came galloping back, the beat of the horses' hoofs sounding like distant thunder. The sound of firing died away, and for the moment all was quiet.

"We shall see them soon," said a Major, and we waited, intently watching the landscape before us.

"There they are!" And in the fields in front there appeared tiputting cautiously forward a thin line of horsemen. Not a shot was fired and all was quiet. Very carefully the enemy advanced, with periodical halts, to search with glasses the ridge we were on for signs of the main line of defence.

When the enemy were about a thousand yards away, a great roll of musketry broke out from our main defence; one or two of the horsemen collapsed, and the remainder turned about, and galloped away under cover.

"I think that's all for to-day. They

have spotted our main line, which is probably all they wanted to do for the present."

"Yes. But it was a pretty little scrap. Might have been South Africa again."

CHAPTER X

THE TURN

DAY succeeded day, and still we retreated. August gave place to September, and still each morning saw the long columns moving southwards. The country changed in character, became more wooded and more rugged in aspect.

The folk of the many villages we passed through gave us masses of fruit, plums, peaches, apples, and pears, of delicious ripeness, an ambrosial gift to throats parched by the dust and blazing heat. The majority of the inhabitants during the later stages of the retreat did not fly, preferring to face the enemy rather than forsake their homes, but, even so, we saw many farms and cottages hurriedly deserted.

During these days we had no definite news of what had happened or what was

happening in other parts of the vast battlefield, but many stories and rumours passed, and lost neither substance nor colour in their passage. We heard that Namur had fallen by treachery, that at Charleroi there had been a fight of unutterable ferocity, that the French Government had left Paris, that the Russians were swarming into East Prussia, and would soon reach Berlin, that the Kaiser had committed suicide, that the Kaiser was slowly but surely dying of some obscure but dreadful disease, that the Kaiser had been assassinated, that there had been a decisive naval battle, and that we were retreating not because of the enemy, but merely to rest and recuperate at Paris, where gigantic preparations were being made for our entertainment.

We crossed the Marne at Meaux, where sappers were destroying the bridges, and were told that the end had come at last ; but no—the next day we still continued our march, till we asked each other in despair if we were going on for ever.

And then unexpectedly, on 5th September, whilst we were in bivouac near Liverdy came the order to move *towards the enemy*, and the Great Retreat was at an end.

On the 4th of September, to Von Kluck the military situation must have appeared promising indeed. His army advancing victoriously on the German right wing had beaten the British, who were retiring, shattered, to the south-west, and was now striking south-east to turn and drive back the French left upon its centre, thereby leading to another and a far greater Sedan.

But on 6th September the situation was far different, and the vision of victory had slipped away. The retreating enemy had everywhere turned fiercely upon their pursuers, even to the hated British, who, by all calculation, were out of the running, while aeroplanes reported that from Paris a new army had appeared, which was marching direct upon his exposed right flank. The outflanker was being encircled. With a swiftness of decision and a promptness of action which showed how well he

realized the danger of the situation, Von Kluck gave the order to retire, and his army was soon in full retreat towards the north. But at the time we had no idea of these events; we only knew that we were advancing instead of retiring, and the sweetness of that knowledge sufficed.

To outward appearances nothing was changed from the days of the retreat; the same hot and dusty men tramped along the same roads, white and radiating heat; the same exhausted horses pulled the same guns and wagons; but beneath the unaltered surface of things there was a difference, for anxiety had gone and the hope of victory was in every eye.

At Pezarches we had the excitement of seeing for the first time actual evidence of German occupation, and of the precipitate nature of their flight. This small village must have been the farthest point that their bloody thrust into the heart of France attained. We reached the village about midday on 7th September. There

were billeting directions in German chalked on the doors ; there were a couple of exhausted horses left behind in an orchard, and there were some scraps of equipment, a number of cartridges, and a broken lance. The inhabitants were very garrulous about the doings of the enemy, and one old farmer told a most interesting tale.

“ Yesterday we heard the noise of gunfire get closer and closer, and we sat here in the farm expecting every moment that these *sales boches* would come. But the firing died away, and the sun set without a sign either of the enemy or of our own troops. I thought *le bon Dieu* was going to keep us safe, but suddenly there came a clatter of hoofs outside, a hoarse voice began shouting roughly in broken French, and I knew it was *they*. I went out on to the road, and there in the dusk I saw a group of Uhlans with two officers at their head, each with an automatic pistol in his hand. When they saw me one of them covered me with his weapon and bade me approach, ‘ If you

make any resistance, I will shoot you dead,' he said; so what could I do but obey? 'Are there any French or English here?' 'No,' I replied. He turned and gave some orders to his men, who clattered off under a *sous-officier*; then, turning to me, he went on: 'Is this your house?' 'Yes.' 'Good! We will stay the night here. Any nice girls here, eh?' and he leered bestially. 'All *my* countrywomen are charming!' I replied, at which he scowled at me. 'You will get me dinner and wine at once, and if it is not good you will suffer!' He went away with the other officer for half an hour or so, and then returned and sat down to the meal my wife had got ready. Sapristi! How they did eat and drink, and all the while ogling my daughter and the servants! *Nom de Dieu*, but my hands twitched to throttle their thick red throats. After some final orders to the *sous-officier*, who stood and saluted like a man of wood, they went to sleep on my best bed, booted and spurred, with revolvers in their hands.

“ This morning they were up before the dawn, and had us up also to get them another enormous meal. While it was being cooked they swaggered about, clattering their swords and boasting that they would be in Paris in a few days. Suddenly, when the food was ready and just as they were sitting down with much gusto, a horseman galloped *ventre à terre* up to the door and called out something. The officers jumped up and made for the door, while we followed. *Nom d'une pipe*, but the horse of the newcomer was in a state, covered with bloody sweat and foam and shaking as if with ague ! It is now even in my orchard, too exhausted to move. The horseman, when he saw the two officers, saluted and held out a message, which was torn open. As they read it, their faces became as stone, and I heard one of them mutter something about ‘schwein-hund Engländer.’

“ The senior pulled out a map, which they both hurriedly examined, called for the *sous-officier*, gave some orders in short

guttural sentences, and in a quarter of an hour the whole party clattered away to the north, leaving the beautiful meal untouched."

We reached Coulommiers in the afternoon. Entering from the high ground on the south, we looked down the main street, which is about a quarter of a mile long and runs at right angles across the valley of the Grand Morin. It presented an extraordinary spectacle—all the windows and doors were burst open and were marked in chalk with German words and figures; out of all the windows hung odd assortments of linen and clothes, and on the ground below were further piles of it, mingled with broken ornaments and shattered crockery. The late tenants, through sheer wanton destruction, had ransacked every house and had thrown everything they could lay hands on out of the windows. In the little gardens along the street were numbers of chairs and tables laid for meals, and everywhere, on the tables in the gardens and along the

sides of the street, were bottles—not a dozen or so, but hundreds and hundreds of bottles, littered promiscuously : cognac bottles, liqueur bottles, wine bottles of every colour and shape—and every one was empty. There must have been a bacchanal orgy of drunkenness.

Next day, 8th September, we reached Rebais, where, as usual, the houses had been looted and ransacked and the cellars spoiled of their contents. While we were there a gross, shaven-headed German was found in a cellar, lying dead drunk in a pool of wine. The inhabitants showed us a house which, they said, Von Bülow had occupied, and they told us that, before leaving, the Germans had levied a heavy toll in cash.

In the afternoon the advance was brought to a standstill, owing to the resistance of the German rearguards along the Petit Morin. Battalions and batteries were forced to deploy to assist the advance guard to drive back the enemy. Fighting continued during the afternoon on our

immediate front, and from the right came the sound of heavy firing. Late in the afternoon, we advanced about a couple of miles beyond Rebais to a village called Gibraltar, where we received orders to billet for the night. As it was raining, we took shelter in a cottage owned by an aged couple who might have stepped out of one of Millet's pictures. When we entered, the two old people were sitting round a wood fire, which burned on an open hearth and over which hung an iron pot, containing the evening soup. They rose and greeted us in a charming manner, speaking in a patois difficult to understand. They would be delighted, they said, to make us as comfortable as they could, but they were only poor people and we must not expect much. We assured them that it was only a roof we required and that we could sleep anywhere. With many apologies the old man showed us into a tiny bedroom, half filled by a bed over which was a canopy. The bed was stained with mud and the floor was covered a foot deep in straw.

“It is not clean, but I cannot help it. These *sales boches* were here last night,” he said. “Seven of the pigs slept in this small room—two on the bed and five on the floor.”

That night we dined with the old people, who gave us steaming bowls of soup from the iron pot, and afterwards we gathered round the fire and drank wine, which the old man produced from under a flagstone.

“They did not know what was under there,” he said, chuckling, “or we should not be drinking this now, my friends. I know the ways of these cursed soldiers of Prussia, for it is not the first time they have been here. In '70 when I was a young man they slept in this very house, as they did last night. *Mon Dieu*, but France has suffered beneath their heel!”

For the following days, until the 12th of September, the advance continued. The enemy rearguards fought with great skill and tenacity, holding up our advanced troops and forcing us to deploy our main

bodies, thus gaining time for the divisions of Von Kluck's Army to escape, both from the British and from the terrible threat of the avenging 6th Army, which had debouched from Paris and which was hammering fiercely against the German flank along the Ourcq. Away to the east, about Chalons, the fighting was of a ferocious nature; here a great battle was fought, and that master of war, Foch, inflicted a most sanguinary defeat upon the enemy, capturing many thousands of prisoners and hundreds of guns.

On 9th September we bivouacked at Nanteuil by the banks of the Marne, which flows serenely along a deep and winding valley, flanked by wooded heights, and at dawn on the morrow were on the march once more, crossed the river, and, after climbing a long hill, reached the rolling uplands to the north. The more we progressed the more we saw evidences of the German retreat and of the rearguard fighting. On either side of the main road two parallel tracks were beaten, showing

that the enemy were in such haste that they had retired in the old Napoleonic treble column—vehicles on the road, cavalry and infantry on either flank.

Along the roads were scattered empty tins, cartridges, rifles, lances, fragments of field-grey uniform and discarded packs, made of hide with the hair still on. Occasionally we came upon derelict German motor-lorries and German transport. In many places were gruesome evidences of fighting—hasty entrenchments scooped a foot or so into the soil, with a litter of empty cartridges and a corpse stiffly twisted in a self-made grave. At one spot a German battalion must have been caught in the open by our guns, for a soft stubble field showed the marks of many feet, was pitted with shell-holes, and was strewn with dead men. At another place an enemy column of transport had been caught crossing the crest of a ridge. The line of horsed vehicles with attendant drivers was still in the terrible immobility of death. The wagons were torn and

shattered, white splinters of wood bristling upwards like bones. The horses, gashed and disembowelled, lay in groups, weltering in congealed ponds of blood, while on the horses and across the vehicles huddled the crumbled forms of what lately had been men. Batches of prisoners passed by under guards, who seemed filled with the importance of their task, and who showed off the points of their charges like a dog-fancier with a new purchase.

On the afternoon of 12th September, we were marching on a plateau of wheat-land a few miles to the south of Braisne, when the order was passed down to halt. Firing broke out ahead, and the throbbing sound of a heavy engagement came from the direction of Soissons. Stories were circulated that our cavalry had met with severe resistance in the Vesle Valley and that the French to the north were encountering an ever-increasing opposition. It was said that the Germans had reached the line which they intended to hold and that the next few days would see severe fighting.

We waited, dismounted, along the road, not knowing what was happening ahead of us. Four o'clock passed, five, six, and still we remained halted. The clouds which had been banking up all day broke and torrents of rain fell, drenching every one. The firing died away and darkness came on. Eight, nine, and ten o'clock went by and still we remained halted in the dripping blackness. Every one began to grumble and ask what was the matter. Units behind kept on passing up frantic queries, and units in front kept on sending back dolorous replies. At last, after over six hours of the most miserable and wearisome of waits, orders came to move into billets. We picketed the horses in a field so sticky with mud that the wagons could hardly be moved, and then men and officers found shelter in a vast stone-built farm, where two batteries and another ammunition column were also installing themselves.

CHAPTER XI

THE AISNE

WHEN the German right wing was forced to swing back again from the Marne, the enemy high command chose a line of defence in rear on which to retire. It has been said that this line had been previously heavily entrenched, and it has been hinted that in some miraculous way the Germans had carried out this preparation in the days of peace—an absurd statement. The line was chosen because it was flung far enough back to escape the threat of outflankment and because it was naturally strong. When the retreating armies reached it, they may have found the general trace of the trenches marked out, and perhaps a few field works, dug by auxiliary and reserve troops, who had been on the lines of com-

munication, but the main entrenchments were made by the retreating troops themselves, when they received the order to stand. The fact that we were brought to a halt on the Aisne was not because of some uncanny strength of the positions occupied by the enemy, but because the enemy, having evaded the danger of encirclement, resisted *à outrance*, which, with his greater numbers and with the defensive power of modern weapons, he was able effectually to do.

The first troops to discover the sudden hardening of the enemy front were the cavalry, who found that it was impossible to advance. With the failure of the cavalry our main forces were deployed, but after most gallant and desperate attacks made no great headway, while from the French on either flank came similar news. The enemy reacting against us made a number of heavy counter-attacks which were bloodily repulsed. As the days passed, each side dug themselves in, and gradually there grew the immense

opposing lines of fortifications which for years were to mark the boundary between the warring nations. To overcome this stagnation of movement each side began trying to outflank the other, and thus began the race towards the sea.

On the morning of the 13th September the ammunition column reached the edge of the plateau overlooking the Vesle Valley, and began descending the long and winding road which leads down to the village of Braisne. From the top, one could see the whole valley, spread below, like an open map, while beyond were massive heights, whose flanks were densely wooded and whose tops were flat and bare. Along the roads and amid the fields below infantry and artillery could be seen in movement, while among the trees about Chassemy shells were bursting, the wump—wump—wump—of the explosions echoing from hill to hill.

We entered Braisne, which was crammed with troops and transport, and we passed a

large batch of prisoners who were markedly inferior in physique and general appearance to the other prisoners we had seen. All the haberdashery shops in the town were crowded with soldiers buying or otherwise procuring headgear, for numbers of our Division had lost their service caps, and this was not confined to the rank and file. One saw both men and officers wearing cloth caps, Homburgs, and Panamas—a most outrageous spectacle.

About ten o'clock our ammunition column halted in a field on the northern outskirts of the town. From the direction of Chassemy came the sound of firing, and occasionally an odd shell whined through the air and burst close by. Stories were brought back by excited men that the road in front was under a heavy fire which had caused many casualties.

Soon a number of G.S. wagons came clattering back along the road at a great speed, followed later on by a battery of our Brigade which had been with the

advance guard. An officer of the battery told us what had happened.

In the morning the advance had been continued, and the battery, preceded by a battalion of infantry, marched through Braisne, which had been captured the previous day by the cavalry, and along the road which leads to Vailly. At first they were hidden from the enemy by woods, but half a mile or so before reaching the village of Chassemy the woods ceased and the road crossed some open fields, which were in full view of the enemy observers hidden on the heights above Condé. With great cunning the enemy did not fire until the infantry had moved well on and the battery was in full view. It must have been a magnificent target for his gunner officer, watching the snake-like column unwinding down the white road from the dark depths of the trees. One can imagine him, his eyes glued to his glasses, the while uttering guttural exclamations of Teutonic joy. The first shell pitched and exploded with a stunning

crash a few yards off the road, and then a second and a third. Men and horses were killed and wounded, and still from out of the blue shells shrieked and crashed. The battery commander promptly swung his guns off the road and brought them into action in front of the wood, but there was nothing to open fire on, for the hostile battery was completely concealed. With the enemy, however, the opposite was the case, and he switched his fire from the road which, under his attention, had become deserted, on to the battery, pouring on it a deluge of shell. Later, when the fire had ceased, the teams were sent up and the guns withdrawn. In the evening I went up to recover some of the damaged wagons. The ground was pitted with numbers of the now familiar shell-holes. The wagons that remained behind had their wheels smashed and splintered; the steel plates of the bodies were twisted, punctured, and crumpled; the paintwork was scorched, and many of the packed shells had exploded.

No further progress being made, we received orders to billet for the night. Horse lines were erected in the field we were in, the men were installed in some barns, and for the officers a small villa was taken over which had been discovered by the faithful Knut. He came up to the Captain and said: "We 'ave found a nice li'l 'ouse over there, sir, which'll suit us reel proper. Them Germans 'ave mucked it abart no end, but we'll get it tidied up, and I think it'll do very well. Would you come and inspect it, sir?"

We walked across the road, through a small garden, and entered the house. There was the usual evidence of German occupation—doors and cupboards burst open, windows smashed, and on the floors a confused medley of linen, clothes, books, papers, letters, china, glass, ornaments, pictures, and furniture—all torn, shattered, and spoiled. In one room we found a bed soaked and crimson with blood, while filthy bandages, blue gauze, and cut pieces of grey uniform were littered about the floor. I

wondered what the unfortunate owners would have felt and said if they could have seen their home.

“Bit unsanitary-like at present, sir ; but we’ll get it fixed up in no time, and the dinner going in the li’l kitchen there.”

The republic mobilized itself, commenced work, and soon there was a mighty noise and display of sweepings and swishings and removals. I happened to notice that the president had mysteriously disappeared.

The sun was setting, overhead a solitary aeroplane was humming home to roost, as the Captain and I strolled in the garden, smoking cigarettes and waiting for the house to be put in order. Suddenly a figure leaped from the road outside into the bushes, there was a crackle of twigs, a shaking of leaves, and the president of the republic appeared ; his face was a livid green, beads of perspiration started from his forehead, he panted loudly, and within his tunic he hugged something to his breast.

“What on earth have you been doing, Knut?”

“Ooch!” and continued sobs for breath.

The question was repeated, and with many pantings came this reply:

“I went for a stroll like, just to see if I could find sumptink for dinner, and, curious enough, I comes upon a chicken which didn’t seem to belong to anyone in partickler. What ho, says I, and soon the chicken was under my tunic. Then I comes ’ome rapid, and ’ere I am, sir.”

Knut was severely enlightened, the final words being: “Don’t gallop it, and can you manage some bread sauce?”

“I think so, sir,” and Knut departed to the kitchen.

“A marvellous man,” said the Captain, “the best batman in the British Army, and he used to keep my silver perfectly; but I’m afraid he’s rather democratic.”

As he finished speaking, I noticed a Staff Captain of infantry approaching.

“The enemy,” I whispered.

The stranger approached and said:

"Haw! I think this is our billet. You will have to move out of this, I'm afraid."

"I think you're mistaken. This is a gunner billet, and we've shaken down here."

"I can't help that."

"I am not going to turn out. Where's your authority?"

The Staff Captain spluttered, turned on his heel with a muttered something about "damned gunners always pinching the best billets," and disappeared.

The next day the attempt to advance was renewed. The headquarters and the three batteries of the Brigade moved forward, while the ammunition column was ordered to wait, harnessed up, ready to advance if required. The adventures of the batteries on this day were so extraordinary that I relate them as told me by an officer who participated in them.

With the object of supporting the infantry, who were on the north side of the Aisne, they advanced in column of route down the road to Vailly. At first they

were hidden by trees from the enemy, but when they crossed the pontoon bridge across the river, which was under observation, they were fired on. However, they reached the farther side in safety, but here found that as the infantry could not advance they were almost on top of them, and from the configuration of the ground it was quite impossible to open fire. So the three batteries then turned east, moving along the northern bank parallel to, and but a few hundred yards from the infantry front line, until they reached another bridge by which they returned. But the enemy gunners were waiting for them, and directly the head of the column appeared, crossing the bridge, they opened fire. Then, at intervals, each team galloped across the exposed bridge, each one drawing a salvo of high explosive from the enemy. But, though the fire of the enemy got more and more accurate, and though such a number of teams traversed the bridge, yet the casualties incurred were surprisingly small.

When the batteries started on their hazardous excursion to the north of the river, and while the ammunition column was drawn up awaiting instructions to move, I was ordered to go and reconnoitre for a possible route to Chassemy by which the column could advance without having to pass along the unpleasant portion of that road which was under direct enfilade fire. I mounted my horse and trotted on to the main highway which leads from Braisne to Soissons, and from which I hoped to be able to find a track or lane striking off towards Chassemy and Vailly. After trotting on half a mile or so the road became absolutely deserted; bare and white and straight it stretched before me, dwindling in perspective into nothingness. Nor on the fields to my right, nor on the slopes of the hills to my left, could I see any living thing, man or beast. To all appearances the land was empty of life, though in reality it teemed with troops. The only indication of war was the constant thunder of the guns. I was

reckoning that another ten minutes would bring me to the spot to branch off at, when, as if by magic, there appeared in the middle of the road, a thousand yards ahead, a large yellow mushroom cloud of smoke, and immediately on the sight came whee-oo-bang! and I sensed a feeling of emptiness within me and an interruption of the normal pulsing of the heart. It is a common experience that in moments of danger a companion is of untold value; if he is braver than you, you imbibe his courage, and feel strengthened. If you are braver than he, you feel a gratifying sense of superiority. If you both are of the same courage value, you mutually support each other, but when you are utterly alone you become introspective and imaginative, which is more dangerous than the danger itself. With the advent of the possibility of sudden death, two persons seemed to take control of me—the one a pessimist, the other an optimist.

The pessimist said: "The situation is pretty damnable. If you go on you will

in all probability get killed or will receive a ghastly wound, and will lie on the road lingering in agony. You had better stop until it is over, or try and find a way round."

The optimist said: "My dear fellow, these are only a few odd shells fired indirectly at the road. Devilish good shooting, I'll admit, but nothing to kick up a fuss about. Remember, you expect to see shells in war-time and you've got a job to do—so push on."

While these persons were confuting within me, my body and the horse beneath had continued up the road a few hundred yards when another shell burst. This time, sight and sound were simultaneous. The dispute continued with redoubled vigour, but the optimist winning, I continued on my way. Then came another familiar whine, this time before the burst, and another monstrous explosion and upheaval three hundred yards in front. I still went on and passed the place where the shells had burst. The optimist looked

curiously at the holes in the road and the scars on the neighbouring trees, and the pessimist listened uncomfortably for another shell which, thankfully, did not arrive until I was safely past.

I discovered an unmetalled but passable road leading off to the right, and up this I explored. Wandering on for a mile or so, amid woods of young trees, I met an officer and a party of men lying under the shelter of a bank.

“This lead to Chassemy?” I asked.

“Yes, straight along and first turning to the left. It’s not very healthy about here. They’ve been peppering shrapnel all over the place, and the village has had a proper doing. I believe they’ve had a lot of casualties, but it’s quiet for the moment.”

I thanked him, with an assumed air of calm, and went on up the road indicated, which was flanked by woods. Turning a bend, I suddenly found myself in a street of death. A line of abandoned artillery wagons stretched in front of me, many

of which were scored and splintered. Numbers of dead horses still in harness lay in pathetic postures, their brown eyes glazed, their nostrils brimming with blood, while here and there were the stiffening, waxen shells of men. To right and left the houses showed gaping wounds, and the walls were pitted with a thousand holes. The glass of every window was shattered to fragments, and piles of broken slates and crumbled masonry strewn the road. No living thing stirred, and over all brooded the silence of the eternal spaces, for even the guns seemed to have ceased their thunder.

I moved slowly up the street, and the ring of my horse's hoofs upon the cobbles echoed mournfully from side to side. I reached the centre of the village, and there suddenly came upon an officer, crimson with blood, seated on a stone, and staring vacantly before him.

"I say, can I help you?" I said, going up to him, for I thought he must be wounded.

"No," he replied, rather shakily, "no, I'm all right. It's my horse—not me. Look!"

I gazed in the direction he pointed, and saw a headless horse lying in a smoking scarlet pool.

"I was riding through here when the shelling started. There was hell let loose, and then something struck my mount, taking its head clean off. It stood a moment and then collapsed in a fountain of blood."

Farther on, I met a woman, shrieking and running stupidly in and out of a house which had half a wall carried away, exposing a ruined interior. I tried to pacify her, but without avail, so I went on my way.

Eventually I arrived back with my report and found that in my absence orders had arrived for us to remain at Braisne, and here we remained until the great move to Flanders.

On 12th September the cavalry cleared the valley of the Vesle, but were afterwards

brought to a standstill. On 13th September and for the ensuing three or four days the British Army crossed the Aisne and fought fiercely to advance farther, but without success. Gradually the front crystallized into immobility, and here our troops remained for three weeks. During this period one can trace the beginnings and growth of the methods of trench warfare, which are now familiar to so many.

The trenches, first begun by the individuals of the firing lines scooping each for himself a hole in the ground, grew apace into a network of excavations, while away behind the firing line there appeared systems of reserve trenches, sited and dug under the directions of G.H.Q. With the ever-increasing ramifications of the trenches began the first dug-outs, which were small caves burrowed into banks or widenings of the normal trench, roofed in with such material as was to hand and covered by a layer of earth sufficient to give protection against splinters. With the propinquity

of the opposing lines it was necessary to get accurate artillery fire close in front of our own firing trench ; this necessitated most accurate observation, and this in turn necessitated forward observation officers and telephone wires laid from the batteries to the infantry.

And now began the allotment of a definite section of the front for each battery to cover with its fire, which developed in time to the barrage or curtain of fire, the basis of present tactics. To prevent a sudden rush of the enemy, obstacles such as wire cut from fences and rabbit netting from the neighbouring woods were erected, forerunners of the vast barbed wire entanglements which now stretch from Switzerland to the sea.

On the Aisne were first encountered the German heavy howitzers, "five-point-nines," "eight inch" and "eleven inch" (the latter being brought down from Maubeuge after its fall), whose shells, from the noise of their explosions and the black colour of their bursts, became known as "Jack

Johnsons," "Black Marias," and "Crumps." We, in turn, brought up "heavy stuff," which consisted of four siege batteries of 6-inch howitzers, far inferior to the enemy weapons and laughable when compared either in numbers or in size to the monster weapons we have to-day, yet which, at the time were greeted with joy and respect. These howitzers were old, both in design and age, but they fired 120 and 100 lb. shells with great accuracy, only their range was very short, being less than that of a field gun. On the Aisne also began for the first time the direction of artillery fire from aeroplanes, which was done occasionally by wireless, but mostly by the use of coloured lights. Here, too, appeared the first observation balloon; needless to say, it was the enemy who had it. With the increasing use of aeroplanes began a heavier and heavier fire of anti-aircraft guns. At first this was confined to the Germans, who used to plaster the sky about our planes with shells fired from properly designed weapons, but at last we brought out from England

a few pom-poms, which against aeroplanes are about of as much use as a pea-shooter.

On the subject of these pom-poms there was a yarn current which may or may not be true.

One day there appeared suddenly and mysteriously a wild Irish subaltern, a gang of giants from the R.G.A., and a pom-pom. Their arrival caused a slight stir and a pleasing expectation of German aeroplanes dropping from the sky like pheasants. The Irishman soon proceeded to work, and hundreds of his little 1-lb. shells hummed heavenwards. The immediate result of his labours was nothing except a protest from the R.F.C., but as the R.F.C. were small in numbers and lived either in the air or in unknown places, beyond the hills, this protest passed unnoticed.

Soon, however, it was discovered that the little shells of the Irishman's toy-gun only burst on percussion, and as they never hit anything in the air, they therefore all exploded on the ground. Public opinion, at best a fickle thing, turned against the

aircraft gunner, but he cared not a snap of his fingers and continued to squirt his shells upwards at friend and foe alike, declaring that by St. Patrick it was the greatest sport in all the world.

Public opinion grew stronger and darker against him until at last the climax came. One morning a brass hat of much brassiness was shaving at the window of his billet when he heard "pom-pom-pom-pom," and he said to himself, "That's probably got one." The next moment there was a series of sharp explosions, the sound of breaking glass, and the hand of the exalted one jumped and gashed his cheek. A fierce inquiry elicited the fact that breakfast had been ruined and that undoubtedly the explosions were the bursting of pom-pom shell.

Thereupon a stern and peremptory edict went forth that the Irishman and his pom-pom were to be withdrawn from action, but he, not liking this order at all, disappeared into the fields with his gang of giants, his pom-pom and a great store of

ammunition. Despite a vigorous search he could not be found, though the sound of his pom-pom never ceased ; furthermore, the infantry began making complaints that at night-time a wild man with a gang of gigantic ruffians was in the habit of visiting the trenches and firing off a devilish instrument at the enemy, which action brought upon themselves a terrible retaliation.

The end came when a band of gaunt and bearded men gave themselves up to the A.P.M., saying that they had deserted, but that they could no longer go on serving with a madman and living on roots and raw eggs.

With trench life becoming the normal existence of the soldier, and with the coming of autumnal rains came the mud ; and with the mud came tetanus, which caused many wounds to become fatal, and which led to the use of anti-tetanic serum, now injected immediately into every wounded soldier.

About the 18th of September, the 6th

Division arrived from England, and were used to relieve the most exhausted battalions in the line, and so in the evenings one began to hear the continuous tramp of marching men and see in the darkness endless shadows moving by, bent beneath their packs.

From the very start of the Aisne battle the spy scare was strong, and tales of spies were on every lip. There were stories of Germans dressed as staff officers driving about in motor-cars collecting information in the most brazen manner. There were stories of French farmers, bought by German gold, being discovered communicating with the enemy. There were stories of German officers lying hidden in the woods behind our line, where they reported our movements and directed their fire by means of threadlike telephone wires, cunningly laid out before our arrival.

Owing to the vastness of modern armies, the Commander loses personal touch with his troops, and so, when he wishes to stir their imagination or tune up their morale,

he writes an Order of the Day and gives instructions for so many thousand copies to be printed by the mobile army press and issued to the various units, where it is read to the troops. These have little effect on the British soldier, whose matter-of-fact mind requires the personal touch before it evinces any signs of excitement. About 20th September, however, there came down the official channels from G.H.Q. one printed notice which was the exception to the rule. This was the famous order of the Kaiser, found during the advance upon the body of a dead Prussian officer, in which the All Highest urged his troops to exterminate "the contemptible little army" of Britain.

As the order was read out, a visible thrill of anger ran down the lines of listening men.

Day after day passed without a change in the routine, and we began to chafe at the monotony of this sedentary warfare. To relieve the tedium I obtained permission to make excursions about the neighbour-

hood, some of which it may be of interest to relate.

One day I visited railhead at the station of Braisne, where the reinforcements were detrained and where the wounded were put into hospital trains. I passed through the town square, which was filled with G.S. wagons of various units, drawing their forage and rations from the A.S.C., and went up a narrow street which skirted the old church.

I arrived at the station, which I found was typically French. The station-master and his family lived above the various offices, the platforms were but a few inches above the level of the rails, and on the track, where grass grew luxuriantly, black locomotives pulled trains of an astonishing length. An R.T.O. and an elderly French captain of engineers were plotting something with another station staff over a telephone ; a young English soldier clerk was explaining in a strange jargon to a stout farmer and his wife how to get to Paris ; and on the platform were

some tall Scotchmen in chocolate-coloured kilts, who were brushing the ground with a singular vigour and thoroughness. I knew from the length of their legs and from the energy with which they worked that they were not ordinary privates of the line, and my curiosity being aroused I inquired who they were. They answered, as I had expected, in a civilized and educated tongue, and told me that they were a party of the London Scottish, and confided in me their ardent hope that by the exhibition of intense energy and by the throwing of many salutes exactly as laid down in the drill book, they would be sent to the front line. They asked what my opinion was, and I replied that they would be there sooner than they expected, and that I was willing to bet untold gold that they would fight the Germans before the war was over, at which they appeared greatly relieved. But a few weeks and some of those ardent spirits were to pass away on the ridge about Messines.

A convoy of ambulances arrived, and their burdens of suffering were removed on stretchers and laid in rows on the ground, alongside the hospital train, which consisted of ordinary passenger coaches with red crosses painted on the windows. The majority of these men had been wounded the day before; during the night they had been carried laboriously back, first by hand and then in horse ambulances to the dressing-station in Braisne, where they had been attended to, and from whence they were sent to rail-head. The rows of wounded presented a pathetic spectacle—torn and mud-stained uniforms, wan faces, and marble limbs swathed in snow-white bandages. I saw none of that uproarious hilarity which war correspondents so delight in depicting, as if a man without a face, or with a bullet-punctured body, was amongst the happiest of mortals. One spirit had left its tortured body, which lay apart, in pathetic isolation, ready to join a growing line of wooden crosses in a field near by. A doctor and

a French nurse in white from head to foot moved along the rows of stretchers, ministering to the men and directing their embarkation, and their every movement was followed intently by a hundred pairs of eyes.

While the wounded still lay upon the ground, a draft of reinforcements which had just detrained marched by, and each man of them looked with sympathy at their stricken comrades.

On another occasion I visited Vailly. There was a tinge of autumn in the air as I passed through Chassemy and along a road in the woods beyond. The only person I met was a sapper officer who was examining a telephone cable, and with whom I talked for a moment or two.

“My cable’s always being cut. I’m certain there are still some Germans hiding in these woods. Yesterday a sergeant of mine was patrolling the line and saw one of them actually cutting the wire. Luckily he had his rifle with him and shot the blighter dead as a door-nail. When he

examined him, he found a mile of wire round his body. They *are* damned cunning !”

A few shells whined through the air and exploded somewhere out of sight among the trees.

“ That’s their ‘ good morning,’ ” he said.

“ Is the crossing all right ? ” I asked.

“ If they don’t happen to be shelling, it’s A1—a model pontoon bridge in the best Chatham style, but they can see it, and if many people cross they open up at once. But single persons they don’t worry about much, unless they are feeling unusually vicious. If you are going across I shouldn’t dawdle.” And he laughed.

I left him and rode along until the woods ended, and there I stopped to prospect the passage. Before me the road stretched bare and exposed for a hundred yards, then it crossed a small canal by an unbroken bridge, and reached the Aisne. The girders of the original bridge across the river had been cut by explosives and lay twisted and crumpled between the piers. To the right

of the original bridge was a temporary one of pontoons made under fire most gallantly by the sappers on 13th September. Beyond the river, I could see the church and houses of Vailly, backed by the high ground where our front line clung. To the left, a mile or so away, were massive heights which were held by the enemy and which overlooked the passage of the river.

I rode out of the shelter of the woods into the open, feeling as if a hundred enemy telescopes were turned upon me. I crossed the first small bridge and moved on to the pontoons. There were some smashed carts in the water and a number of dead horses lying by the roadside and on the banks. When I was about the middle of the bridge a shell swished overhead and struck the water with a flop, throwing up a column of water.

A town heavily shelled for the first time presents a sadder and more distressful picture than later on when months of bombardment have reduced it to a gigantic rubble heap and a few gaunt walls.

I found Vailly deserted and silent ; the houses were scarred and chipped by bullets and splinters ; chairs and tables, and in one place a piano, lay about the streets ; huge gaps were torn in the walls, and in some places whole fronts of houses had been blown away, exposing the rooms like those of a doll's house. Many of the buildings were on fire and waves of heat beat across the streets. Near the church there was an advanced dressing-station. I was told by a medical officer who worked there that two French girls assisted to tend the wounded men under heavy fire and refused stoutly to leave. Eventually both these brave women were killed.

Leaving my horse in an empty stable, I visited the trenches, where everything was quiet, and I returned to Braisne.

On 1st October I started off on my horse to pay a visit to a gunner friend in the 2nd Division, whom I had met, by chance, in a *débit de tabac*, and who had asked me to come and see his battery. On my way across the valley of the Vesle

I passed a farm which showed signs of having been the scene of some fighting. The garden walls were loopholed ; rifle and shrapnel bullets had scored the bricks ; a gaping hole was in one side of the house and by the roadside were two or three small crosses. The owner came out as I passed by, and he told me that the Germans had occupied the house and had defended it against the British cavalry that had captured Braisne. Eventually the enemy were driven out, after suffering a few casualties. One German who had been shot through both legs continued firing as he lay upon the ground until he was at last killed. His last action was to spit hatred at the English soldier who shot him at point-blank range.

From the valley the road wound upwards through woods, until it reached a bare plateau dotted with ricks of corn. I passed by some reserve trenches recently dug which, from a technical point of view, were most interesting. They were placed behind the crest, with a very restricted field of fire, of about a hundred yards, instead of being

placed beyond the crest with a wide field, according to pre-war ideas. This was done in accordance with a new theory that at all costs our trenches must be concealed from the enemy artillery.

Farther on, I met my friend in his battery wagon line, which was hidden in a fold of the ground on the southern edge of the plateau.

“We will go to the observing station and have a look at things,” he said; and so we walked across the open fields towards a large rectangular rick. When we were close to it, he said, “For Heaven’s sake, don’t make a noise; the old man is in a hole up there on the left and strongly objects to visitors.” So we cautiously climbed the rick and ensconced ourselves in a little chamber cut in the straw. Lying full length, we peered out at the landscape—below lay the wooded valley of the Aisne, beyond which the ground sloped upwards in brown sweeps to the rolling plateau, which is crossed by the Chemin des Dames. From right to left one could trace the opposing lines of

trenches, running like brown threads across the fields and among the trees. Here and there white puffs of smoke appeared and disappeared, and the growl of guns reverberated from hill to hill.

“That’s where the Guards are, to the left of that patch of red. They’ve done superbly, simply superbly! They’ve beaten off attack after attack, and the German dead are piled three and four deep in front of their trenches. Nearly three weeks now they have held on and refuse to be relieved. The Queen’s, too, have been simply magnificent. See that sausage balloon over there, beyond the road? Well, our friends popped that up some days ago for the first time. We all looked at it, made fatuous remarks and wondered what they were going to do with it. We knew soon enough, however, for our batteries were shelled by the most colossal stuff, which burst like volcanoes and made craters so large that you could have buried half a dozen horses in them. We found out they were 11-inch hows. from Maubeuge.”

In the afternoon I arrived back at Braisne, to find a state of excitement and activity. Orders had come that we were to move at dusk. What did it mean ?

CHAPTER XII

TO THE NORTH

THERE is in England a class of persons, frequenters of clubs and writers of explosive letters to the papers, who take upon themselves the rôle of military critic. Their military knowledge is generally limited to a perfunctory study of Waterloo, a nodding acquaintance with company drill, and a few elementary facts about modern artillery. These people lightly and airily propound astonishing manœuvres, the most favoured one being a wide-sweeping advance through the Balkans, as if the movement and maintenance of a division were an affair of childish ease and simplicity. Their especial joy is to tilt at the Staff, endeavouring by sententious remarks to gain a certain

amount of military kudos for themselves, and to imply that if they had been "out there" things would have been very different, which would probably be the case. Their accusations are always of the vaguest so as to conceal their ignorance, for if you asked them the difference between a B.G.G.S. and an A.Q.M.G. they could not tell you. With grave waggings of the head they say: "My dear fellow, our Staff have not the experience of handling large armies!" or: "If only our Staff were as highly trained and organized as the German." Or: "The French are competent soldiers"—implying that the British Staff are, on the other hand, of the mentally deficient.

But there is one sure way of silencing and confuting these abhorrent crokers, and that is to announce some of the great feats of organization, transport, and movement that have actually been accomplished. Among these stands the military masterpiece of the transference of the British Army from the Aisne to Flanders. In this operation six divisions of infantry and two

of cavalry, with auxiliary services, were withdrawn from under the nose of the enemy and transported across the lines of communication of two French armies and then thrown into the Flanders battlefield, where the centre of pressure had shifted. So secret was this move kept that the enemy were unaware we had left the Aisne until he encountered our troops in the north. At the same time as the troops were moving, the base was transferred from the Atlantic to the Channel ports, and yet the fighting units were always kept supplied with rations, forage, ammunition, and clothing, and even on the march were issued with blankets to withstand the approaching winter.

On the evening of 1st October we marched out of Braisne on to the plateau where we had been three weeks before. We had no definite news of what was in progress, but we knew that great events were on foot, and rumour whispered that we were marching to Antwerp.

The night was cold and clear. A growing

moon mounted into the purple vault of heaven, filling the countryside with a white and mysterious light which made the corn-stooks in the open fields appear like ghostly battalions. To front and rear the long, shadowy column of men and horses, of guns and wagons, wound slowly forward into the unknown ; the rumble of wheels, the clink of stirrup-iron and curb-chain, and the talk of men merged into a great whisper of sound that echoed strangely over the still and silent country.

As dawn broke, we reached the village of Oulchy le Château, where we received orders to billet. The horses and wagons were drawn off the road and hidden beneath the trees on the wayside, and men and officers were kept in houses, so that during the day the country appeared empty and without movement, revealing nothing to an inquiring aeroplane. For the next three nights we marched by the light of the full moon by Vaumoise and Crépy-en-Valois, resting by day concealed from aerial view.

On 5th October we passed through the magnificent forest of Compiègne, the silver columns of whose beech trees echoed the rumble of our wheels down the silent glades as they had echoed in past years to the swinging passage of the Grand Army and to the regiments of Von Moltke tramping by.

In the afternoon we entrained at a small station just beyond the forest, and as dusk fell we steamed out into the darkness, not knowing where we were bound for, but realizing that great events lay ahead.

Next morning we passed through Amiens and rolled down the valley of the Somme to Abbeville, where we arrived about 2 p.m. Here we waited for over an hour, while various rumours were current as to our future moves; some said we were going on to Boulogne and Calais, and others that the original plans had been changed owing to the gravity of the situation at Antwerp, and that we would detrain at Abbeville.

The sidings of the station were filled

with long troop-trains of open trucks on which were lashed guns and wagons, and of black cattle-trucks crammed, some with horses, some with men. Besides the British there were a number of French troops who had come up from Alsace. The two nationalities looked curiously at each other and began making friendly advances by offers of "tinned monkey" and "plum and apple." Among the French troops there was a Senegalese, a huge man with a face of polished ebony, who at once caught the fancy of the Tommies. Because he was coloured, they shouted at him in an extraordinary mixture of atrocious Hindustani, French, and English. "Hi, darkie, when you dekkko the allymong malum to coopay his ruddy throat." At which, and all such other incomprehensible remarks, the negro grinned an ivory grin of vast good-humour.

About 3 p.m. we received orders to detrain and to move to a château a couple of miles outside the town, and there to billet. We formed up, moved out of the

station and along the quaint, cobbled streets of the town, which in due time were to become so familiar, passed by the serene and venerable façade of the old cathedral, across the square and through more streets to the country beyond. Throughout that day and the next the battalions and batteries of Smith-Dorrien's Corps tramped and rumbled through the sleepy town, whose inhabitants lined the roads and in silence and thankfulness watched the passage of his war-tried men; while a hundred miles to the westward, a few days later, German regiments, polished and furbished, marched at attention in close and rigid sections of fours, hour by hour, through the great city of Antwerp.

As the evening drew in we reached the château, which was white, with green persiennes and a grey slate roof, flanked by turrets. We passed through an iron gate and were directed to picket the horses in an adjoining orchard. Before the château was a rough and spacious lawn, laid out with geometrical flower-beds.

Here two batteries were already installed, the men trampling over the beds, the heavy gun-wheels cutting deep ruts in the soft turf, and the horses pawing the ground into a wilderness and gnawing the bark off the trees.

At the top of the flight of steps before the main entrance stood the owner, the Count C., surveying the scene before him with a mixture of pain and joy—joy that we had forestalled the enemy, and pain at the devastation of his property; but in spite of all he was most courteous to every one.

That evening those officers of the Brigade who were billeted in the château were invited to dine with the Count, and so a few minutes before eight we forgathered in the salon, feeling strangely clean after the luxury of a civilized toilet. If we had been French we should have been gallant and charming in our manner; if we had been Germans we should have clicked our heels, bowed stiffly in all directions and uttered guttural ferocities; if we had been

Russians we should have talked vivaciously ; but, being English, we were struck dumb, and scraped large boots awkwardly on the parquet floor.

The announcement of dinner broke the tension, and we moved into the panelled dining-room. It was most pleasing, after dining off battered and enamelled ware, to sit again at a polished table, where glass and silver shone and scintillated in æsthetic cleanliness.

And appreciation is but a poor word to describe the sense of bodily satisfaction which we felt for the French cooking, after weeks of bully-beef and black tea, while the Château Lafite and old cognac made victory a very near and certain thing.

We slept that night on straw laid down on the floor of the smoking-room. From the distant kitchen came sounds which clearly showed that our *ordonnances* were making rapid progress in their relations with the domestic staff, despite the language difficulty, and from outside, where the

soldiery were gathered about leaping camp-fires, came tags of song, such as :

“Lord Ernest FitzClarence
Wot stole my dear Florence”—

or

“We don’t care a dam for Will-i-am
Because we know ’e’s balmy—
And we’ll give the knock to One O’clock
And all ’is ruddy Army!”

We stayed at Abbeville for two days, and on the night of the 8th October moved off again, passing by the battlefield of Crecy.

We rested at Raye during the morning of the 9th October, and at 6 p.m. were on the march again. During the night we met hundreds of motor-buses carrying infantry; the throbbing of so many engines and the seemingly endless line of headlights shining in the darkness, appeared strange and fantastic. After a thirteen-hour march, in which we covered twenty-six miles, we reached St. Sains. The horses were so exhausted that even up a small incline they often were unable to move, and one or two dropped and died from sheer fatigue.

On 11th October we left St. Sains about

9 a.m., but, instead of each unit marching separately, we now moved in fighting formation, for we expected at any moment to meet the advance guards of the enemy. In the stillness of the morning we could hear the distant throbbing of guns from the direction of Arras. As we advanced, the character of the country changed, and the rolling wheatlands, dotted with prosperous farms, gave place to sprawling mining towns, where the people, dressed in their Sunday best and with prayer-books in their hands, lined the long, drab streets and watched us marching by. On the way we passed a fleet of motor-cars, each armed with a naval 3-pounder and manned by crews of French sailors. In the evening the road descended steadily till we found ourselves in a new country, low and flat, intersected by roads and ditches and hedges, and covered with many ugly brick villages and scattered houses.

We bivouacked for the night at Hinges, and we heard rumours that our advanced troops were already in contact with the enemy.

CHAPTER XIII

FLANDERS

THE operations in Flanders in 1914, known as the First Battle of Ypres, fall naturally into two sequences of time and two divisions of space. From 10th October to 20th October, when the British Corps from the Aisne were deployed, drove back the enemy cavalry who were about Mont des Cats, Bailleul, Merville, and Béthune, linked up with the Fourth Corps about Ypres, and thus completed the frail chain which stretched from Langemarck in the north to La Bassée in the south; from 20th October to 31st October and onwards through November, when this line withstood terrific and continued attacks from the enemy who had massed against us immense numbers of reserve formations and troops relieved by the

fall of Antwerp. These attacks culminated in the massed assaults along the Menin Road.

The river Lys conveniently divides the field of these operations. To the north were the 1st and 2nd Cavalry Divisions along the Messines Ridge, the 3rd Cavalry Division, the 7th Division, and the First Corps to the east of Ypres. To the south of the river were the Third and Second Corps, supported first by Conneau's Cavalry and afterwards by the Lahore Division.

On 11th October, Smith-Dorrien's Second Corps were everywhere in contact with the enemy, who consisted at first of dismounted cavalry and Jaegers, supported by many machine-guns and some field artillery. The 3rd Division was on the left and the 5th Division on the right; in touch with the 10th French Army about La Bassée. Pivoting about this place the corps swung to its right and for the next week slowly advanced until it had seized the Aubers Ridge, which marked the high water of the British advance. On the left of the 3rd Division a force of French

cavalry under General Conneau, connected with Pulteney's Third Corps, which, having detrained at St. Omer, had advanced by Bailleul to the east of Armentières. Such, in a few bald words, was the course of the vast human struggle in which our ammunition column played its minor part.

On the 13th of October, following the slowly advancing line, we had reached the village of Zelobes, a quarter of a mile or so to the west of Vieille Chapelle. Here we billeted in a farm typical of the country. The sound of firing was continuous, but it was impossible to follow what was happening owing to the nature of the ground, which was flat and covered by hedges, trees, and houses. The fine weather had given place to autumnal gales. Gusts of wind swept over the land, stripping the yellowing leaves in fluttering clouds from trees and hedgerows. Torrents of rain poured down, turning the roads into streams of mud, filling the ditches and transforming into quagmires the meadows where the horses were picketed. Down the lanes struggled

painfully crowds of refugees from the great manufacturing towns of the north of France—men, women, and children, foot-sore, weary, hungry, and soaked to the skin, trudging westwards, driven from their homes by fear of the invader, and carrying their worldly possessions in string bags or paper parcels slung across their bowed shoulders. I saw one woman, who had pushed a perambulator all the way from Lille, lying exhausted on the wet grass by the roadside, unable to make a move to help her baby, who was complaining and coughing pitifully as it lay exposed to rain and wind. I saw children tearing up potatoes with their hands and eating them, raw and muddy, with the savagery of an animal, and as they did so they shivered in the wet and cold. I saw women praying for help at the wayside crucifixes, and men saying bitterly: "There is no God, or these things would not be!"

In the evening I happened to take shelter in an estaminet during an unusually bad torrent of rain. Inside, I found crowds of

refugees, who were huddling round a cast-iron stove, which was dull red with heat. I was about to retrace my steps, preferring the wet to the atmosphere of steaming fugitives, when my eye caught sight of a small man, whose appearance and manner attracted my attention. I asked who he might be, and was told that he was a refugee, and that he had been through a terrible experience. My informant called to the man, who approached me rather reluctantly. He was small, and about forty years of age; his clothes were soiled and torn, and had large holes burnt in them; and on his face and limbs were dreadful burns, inadequately dressed with improvised bandages. A look of terror haunted his eyes. After a few questions he told me the following story :

“ I am a farmer, and lived with my wife and child and my old father on a small farm in a little village near Lille. At the beginning of the war we expected the Germans every minute, but the days passed and no soldiers appeared, until we began to imagine that we should be spared the horrors of war,

But it was not to be, for one morning about two weeks ago a German officer appeared in a motor-car, and in a short while the village was filled with troops, who were billeted in the houses. At first, though the soldiers were rude and insolent, we were not molested. One morning, however, a party of them under an officer burst into the house. I was brutally seized and accused of being a spy. All my protests of innocence were in vain. As I was led outside my old father rushed after me, shouting out that I had done nothing wrong. The officer in charge said something, a soldier lifted his rifle and shot the old man dead. From inside the house came coarse shouts of laughter and the screams of my wife. A wave of rage and hatred surged through me and I struggled with and cursed at my captors, who beat me with their rifles, dragged me away and locked me in a little outhouse. Here I remained some hours, when, suddenly, I smelt burning and discovered that the shed was on fire. Outside I heard laughter, and realized it had been done on purpose.

Choked by smoke, nearly stupid with pain and heat, I somehow burst out of the door into the open, and as I did so I was shot at. Running and dodging like a mad animal, I escaped and, under cover of darkness, reached here."

Such, in its main facts, was the story as told by this man. I can see no reason to doubt his statement, and from the look of haunting terror and mental agony upon his face he most assuredly had been through some ghastly experience.

From 13th October to 17th October we remained at Zelobes; during this period the enemy were gradually driven back to the Aubers Ridge. The fighting was unique. The enemy who, as already mentioned, consisted of dismounted cavalry and Jaegers, were comparatively weak in numbers and artillery, but were strong in machine-guns. Their defence was most tenacious, for, according to a captured order, they were to delay at all costs the English advance until the arrival of strong reinforcements, which were on their way. The flat

and enclosed nature of the country was admirably suited to their defensive tactics ; not only did it give them perfect cover, but it hindered our artillery observation and broke up the cohesion of our infantry attacks.

As the infantry advanced their first intimation of the enemy was a storm of bullets, whining and cracking amongst them, fired from hidden lines of snipers and from machine-guns ensconced in houses. Our losses in officers were, particularly severe. To compete with the machine-guns 18-pounders were run up into the firing line ; for instance, one 18-pounder under a subaltern knocked out five machine-guns in one house at seven hundred yards' range.

About this period optimism ran high. We believed that we were driving in and outflanking the German right wing. We knew that the other corps on the north were advancing towards Lille, and we heard that a new corps had landed at Ostend and was operating about Menin. Bets were

being laid that the Germans would be forced back to the Rhine by Christmas.

When we arrived at Zelobes there were billeted in and about the village some regiments of French cavalry.

On the 14th October I witnessed one of the most dramatic incidents I have ever seen. The morning was fine, and the sun was shining fitfully through angry, ragged clouds as I walked along a muddy lane which led to our billet. Turning a bend in the road I saw a spectacle which made me rub my eyes and wonder if I had not suddenly been transported to Napoleonic times. There, standing at a cross-roads about a hundred yards ahead, was a group of officers in the magnificent uniform of the French Cuirassiers—curved metal helmets with flowing horse-hair tails, burnished cuirasses that flashed in the sunlight, gold sword belts, red breeches, and black polished thigh boots. The group consisted of a General, two Colonels, and some Staff Officers, and all bore decorations on their breasts which added to the splendour of their uniforms.

They were on foot and were in deep consultation over a map. Close by their horses champed their bits and pawed the ground impatiently. As I passed, an officer called to me and asked if I could give him any information as to the British line. I pulled out a map and explained what I knew of our dispositions. Just as I had finished the General exclaimed :

“ Lieutenant C. has not arrived yet ? ”

“ No, mon Général.”

“ He is late—late ! ” and he tapped his foot on the ground.

Suddenly some one cried out : “ V'là—he comes ! ” and all eyes were turned up the road, and we saw approaching us an officer on a horse. As he got closer I saw that he was a young man, that his uniform was covered with mud and his cuirass tinged with rust, and that his horse was utterly exhausted and flecked with foam and blood.

He drew up, saluted, dismounted very slowly, and, holding out an envelope, said, with an effort :

“The message, mon Général.”

As he did so his face, which had been white and set, turned ashen, he staggered and fell to the ground before that splendid group of men. In the back of his cuirass was a jagged hole, from which thick blood was slowly oozing.

On the 17th October we moved forward to Rouge Croix. Everywhere we saw signs of the recent fighting—shattered houses, shell-holes, and hasty entrenchments. At one spot a sort of nest had been scooped in the ground below a hedge, which had served as the lair of a German sniper. One could see the worn marks in the soft earth where he had rested his rifle and his elbow, and in the grass on one side was a pile of empty cartridges, nearly six hundred in number. Behind one house was a stiff mass of dead men and horses, where some lucky shooting of our howitzers had spread sudden death among the sheltering teams of an enemy battery.

At the cross-roads of Rouge Croix there is an estaminet whose proprietor had

remained, taking cover in the cellar during the fighting. He told me that German officers had occupied his house and had forced him to serve them with drinks. One evening they were sitting by his stove, drinking hard, when an English shell screamed through the air and burst just outside with a startling crash. Leaping up they rushed for the cellar, where they sat and cursed the English. Among them was a Hauptman, who was so fat that he descended with the greatest difficulty, and when he did arrive was the colour of his uniform and shaking like a jelly.

The next day we moved to Fauquissart. To the east of this village the ground rises gently to a swell of land now known as the Aubers Ridge, from the village on it of that name. At this time our line ran from Fromelles by Herlies to near the west of La Bassée, which was still held by the enemy. Our battery positions were just to the east of Aubers village. One day, when taking ammunition up to the batteries, as I was approaching the village of Aubers the enemy

started shelling it with field howitzers. Heavy, evil clouds of yellow smoke appeared above the church and house-tops, and the detonations struck rudely on the ear. Suddenly from the village down the road up which I was making my way there swept a torrent of panic-stricken refugees who had been sheltering in the village. Each individual was fighting a way forward in the confused human mass, all were panting from exhaustion, and in all their eyes was the fixed and startled look of the fear of death.

It was a singular thing how, about this time, the civil population of the district collected together in shepherdless flocks, which moved pathetically about the area of operations, swayed hither and thither by the warring emotions of fear and the love of home.

On passing through the village I learned that a terrible event had occurred. It was a Sunday, and many of the refugees had gathered in the church for the morning service. As the deep-toned cadences of

the priestly voice rose and fell and echoed from pillar to pillar, and as the murmur of many responses whispered through the vaulted nave, there came a sound like the crack of doom, the roof split, slates and masonry fell in a cloud of smoke and dust, and a confused noise of human shouts and cries and the stampede of many feet filled the air.

From 17th October to 21st October we remained at Fauquissart. During this period our advance was brought to a standstill by the hardening resistance of the enemy, who had turned the tables by launching attack after attack against our exhausted infantry. In the northern area of the vast battlefield the situation was the same, the forward movement checked everywhere and the counter-pressure of the enemy increasing day by day. On the 18th October the First Corps detrained at Hazebrouck, and the Field-Marshal took one of the most momentous decisions of the war in throwing these two divisions, his last reserve, on the left of the line

rather than use them in answering the desperate calls for assistance he hourly received. Onwards to the end of the month the extended troops held on without hope of relief or help of support.

One morning I met a group of officers in the fields just east of the village. They were in deep consultation, pointing here and there and from time to time kneeling down and gazing along the ground. Two sappers were pegging lengths of tape upon the ground, according to their directions. Following on this, there marched on to the scene a battalion of the 19th Infantry Brigade, who started to dig vigorously along the white lines of the tape. Soon a system of short lengths of trench appeared, with here and there an emplacement designed for a machine-gun.

On 23rd October our front line was withdrawn from its position on the Aubers Ridge to these trenches, and in conformity with this movement the ammunition column had fallen back to the village of Vieille Chapelle. The reason of this movement

was due partly to the now superior strength of the enemy, partly to the left flank of the 3rd Division being thrown too far forward and in consequence being dangerously exposed.

On the afternoon of 22nd October I happened to turn from a lane on to the straight road which connects Neuve Chapelle and Estaires. To my astonishment I saw a column of Indian infantry swinging through the flat prosaic country as unconcernedly as if they were marching down the Grand Trunk Road in the swirling dust beneath the peepal trees and brazen sun. No tribute could have been more fitting than that which India paid to the altar of the British Empire when at the hour of destiny her armed manhood arrived to hold the sagging line against the assaults of the mighty enemy. And no pathos more poignant than the fate of these soldiers from the plains of the five rivers and the hills beneath the Safed Koh, who crossed the oceans to die in the mists of a strange land.

The column drew near and I recognized the Jullundur Brigade, whom I knew of old—Sikhs and Dogras, Pathans and Punjabi Mussulmans, with dark and bearded faces, expressionless beneath their *pagris*. At the heads of companies rode the English officers, and in rear came clattering pack-mules and trains of followers, shivering and coughing in the raw cold. The regiments of this Brigade billeted for the night in the houses about us, and I was asked to dine with one of them. It was strange to sit in a Belgian room and be waited on by Indian khitmutgars and see around you faces which you had last seen laughing and chatting about a silver shining table, beneath a beating punkah frill. My friend, whose guest I was, was killed very shortly afterwards ; he died one dark night on the parapet of a German trench, as he fired upon the enemy beneath him.

One morning about this time the quartermaster-sergeant, returning from the A.S.C. dump with the daily issue of rations and forage, produced from a wagon two bulky

packages which aroused our curiosity. The parcels, on being opened, were found to contain a quantity of underclothing which had been knitted and sewn by a Dorcas Society of an English village. The garments came at a most opportune moment, for the official supply was short and the winter was setting in. Many of them were of extraordinary shapes and sizes. Attached to many articles were little cards bearing messages of goodwill. One, from a maiden lady, said: "I am a little doubtful as to the size of a man's sock, but I hope these will be large enough and will keep you warm." "These" happened to be so large that they were used as sleeping helmets, and warmed not only our heads but also our hearts. Another, written in a large and laborious hand, ran:

"DEAR MISTER SOLJER,—I nitted this mitten myself.—Your affecshunate,
"BETTY."

On another occasion whilst I was examining the damage done by shell-fire to the

church of Vieille Chapelle, I met an old Frenchman who told me of the coming and going of the Germans.

“I was working in my garden over there,” he said, “when I heard the clatter of hoofs, and looking up saw a group of horsemen halt behind the church. They were Germans. Having dismounted, they ran quickly forward, hardly noticing me, and lined the wall along the road over which they cautiously peered. In a few minutes’ time more soldiers arrived, some on horses and some in motors. An officer gave directions in a commanding voice, and the men started to work on the wall, knocking out bricks to make loopholes and bringing up machine-guns which they placed most carefully in position. While this work was going on, the first comers had moved ahead and others had taken more machine-guns to the top of the church tower. Nothing happened during the rest of the day, but the officers were very perturbed about something, for they talked earnestly amongst themselves and con-

tinually consulted a map. They were too busy to worry about us civilians, except to say that if we tried to make off we should be shot, and advised us to stay in our cellars. Next morning, however, a soldier arrived with a message. The senior officer immediately shouted out some orders, upon which riflemen lined the loopholes and the machine-guns were got ready. I knew that either French or English troops were coming to drive away these scoundrels. Presently I heard the sound of rifle shots, and, a little later, some Germans came running in through the gateway in the wall; they were panting hard, and one of them was bleeding from a wound in his arm. All this while I was watching from a window in my house, for I was so excited I could not go down into the cellar. Then one of the riflemen along the wall shouted out something and began firing, and then, with a mighty tapping, the machine-guns started. The noise was deafening and monotonous and drowned all other sounds, so that the actions of the

Germans seemed to be done in silence. After a few moments a window above me broke into fragments and pieces of brick and stone were chipped off the houses and the church. I knew the firing was being replied to by our troops. Suddenly one of the Germans spun round and fell to the ground, with a dreadful wound in his head, and one of the machine-gunners fell forward, coughing blood. Gradually, however, the noise subsided and there was quiet again. The officer in charge walked calmly up and down, giving curt orders, while another officer watched through glasses from a point of vantage, but I noticed one or two of the men looked rather pale and frightened. The silence lasted for about half an hour and was broken by the rush and burst of a shell just overhead; then came another and another, which smashed through the top of the tower and forced the machine-guns up there to come down. The soldiers began working at their rifles harder than before, and more shells cracked overhead, so close

that I could smell the smoke of them. And then at last I took refuge in the cellar. After a while the din subsided and I crept up to my window again to find that the enemy had gone and you English were in the place and we were free."

When I arrived back at the billet the Captain told me that M., whom I had met not so many hours before, full of life and vital energy, had been killed by a shell and that he was to be buried at dusk. That evening we stood in reverent silence about the body in the yawning grave, the voice of the priest was toned by the roll of musketry and the boom of guns, and the light of the moon threw the tower above us into sombre outline against the sky and made mysterious shadows fall among the many crosses of the churchyard.

CHAPTER XIV

BY KEMMEL

ON 5th November, the Captain, who had just returned from a visit to Brigade Headquarters, said to me: "You have been posted to a battery and had better go up this afternoon." So, in a few hours' time, after a farewell look round my section, I found myself trotting up the road, with my kit and batman bumping along in a cart behind me.

I found the battery in rest, the horses in an orchard, and the officers and men billeted in a farm somewhat the worse for shell-fire. I was introduced to my section, inspected my new horses, and got to know the N.C.O.s and men who were now to be in my charge.

At this time a field battery was commanded by a major, with a captain as

second in command. It was organized into three sections, each under a subaltern, and each consisting of two guns, four ammunition wagons, with about fifty horses, and forty odd N.C.O.s and men.

That night all five officers slept on straw in a small room with a large shell-hole in one wall, covered by an oat-sack. The night passed uneventfully, except for a slight difference of opinion about the matter of snoring.

Next morning, before the sun had risen, the battery was harnessed up and moving through the flat country, which was blanketed by a cold, white mist. We rumbled through the still and silent village of Richebourg St. Vaast and along a lane beyond, until we reached an orchard where the battery that we were to relieve was in action. On our arrival, our opposite number pulled out and was away with the alacrity of a boy coming out of school, while we, team by team, swung off the road into the orchard, unhooked the limbers and ran the guns into the emplace-

ments just vacated. These emplacements were merely gun platforms sunk a foot or so below the ground, with a deep narrow trench on either side for the detachments to take cover in. The horses and wagons under the directions of the Captain were picketed in the precincts of a large farm about a quarter of a mile in rear. Owing to the enclosed and flat nature of the country, observation of fire was impossible, except from or near our front line, to which we were connected by telephone.

The next night I was on duty with the guns, and after examining the settings of various angles and ranges, and after testing the communication of the infantry, I stood a moment looking at the scene about me. The forms of the six guns showed up as dark masses among the many fantastic shadows of the orchard. The silhouette of the sentry moved slowly back and forth. The light of the aiming lamp gleamed as a brilliant yellow streak, and overhead the naked boughs formed a tracery against the clear cold heavens. In the stillness

and quiet which the echo of an occasional shot only seemed to accentuate, it seemed hard to believe that all around were tens of thousands of armed men.

Wrapping a blanket around me and thrusting my feet into a sack, I lay down on the straw in the bottom of the short length of trench which served as my dug-out, and in a few minutes I was asleep.

A heavy concussion which shook the earth and vibrated the air, and a sudden pandemonium of explosions which seemed like the beating of drums in hell, brought me with a start to consciousness. In a moment I had kicked the sack off my feet, had thrown off the blanket, and had leaped from the trench to the ground above, shouting : " Action ! "

I saw the shadows of gunners scrambling up from out of the earth and grouping themselves about their pieces, and I saw the sky to the east flickering with vivid flashes. Taking this in at a glance, I dashed to the hole in the ground where the telephonists lived, and I found the man on

duty writing heavily with the stump of a pencil on a pink message pad by the light of a candle which burned unsteadily in a niche cut in the wall of the trench.

“Urgent message from the infantry,” he said, with exasperating deliberation.

“Give me the 'phone!” I replied, and, seizing the instrument, I spoke.

“That Barnes?”

A faint and metallic voice answered: “Who the ruddy 'ell are you?”

“Battery officer. Put an infantry officer on at once.”

“Yes, sir.”

Slight pause, filled with buzzing noises, and then:

“Hullo, battery!”

“Yes.”

“Adjutant speaking. I say, touch these blighters up a bit. They're heaving over land mines and plastering shrapnel over us. Most of it, though, is on the Ghurkas on our left.”

“Right.”

I scrambled out of the trench, back to

the guns, and shouted an order. Cones of dazzling light leaped from the gun muzzles and a crashing roar filled the orchard. I could see that the batteries on the left were firing also.

For some minutes, the noise on both sides continued and then gradually died away, until all was peace again. The infantry professed themselves satisfied, and we turned in.

It was my day as forward observation officer with the infantry, so, mounting a bicycle, I pedalled up the muddy lane which led from the battery to the trenches. The morning was muggy and a white mist lay over the ground, through which the sun showed like a large red ball. As I moved forward the whole countryside appeared deserted; here and there were shell-holes yawning in the roadway; many of the trees on either side were scored and gashed or were cut down and lay along the ground with splintered stumps bristling upwards. A solitary shell whined through the mist and burst harmlessly with a puff

of smoke and a twang of bullets in an empty field on my right. The first person I met was one of our telephonists, who was mending a telephone wire which lay along a ditch by the roadside. Farther on, a turn in the road brought me upon an estaminet and a few houses all peppered with bullet marks and gaping with jagged shell-holes. I found sheltering in these houses a battalion of Ghurkas, and I met one of their officers, from whom I asked the way to the trenches.

“Straight on for about a quarter of a mile,” he said, so I continued to pedal on down the road, heavy with mud.

I was brought to a halt at a cross-roads by a barricade of carts and stones; and I suddenly noticed to right and left rows of black faces looking up at me. An officer shouted, “For God’s sake, come down!” and I heard a crack that made my ears sing. My body, as if acting on its own, leaped from the bicycle and tumbled off the road into the trench at the side.

“What on earth were you doing up

there?" queried the officer who had spoken.

"Trying to find our front line," I replied.

"Well, you are in it. Why you weren't sniped I don't know, for the Germans are only a few yards off."

"I suppose they are at breakfast."

At this period the trench system consisted of the front line which generally ran along definite features of the ground, such as hedges, ditches, and roads, with a few supporting works close in rear. There were no communication trenches nor were there any sandbags, wire, or revetting material, and entrenching tools were scarce.

At this time our own infantry had been withdrawn from the line, preparatory to a move north, and their place had been taken by the Indian Corps, a battalion of which our battery was now covering. The trench into which I had so hurriedly descended ran along the road to the west of Neuve Chapelle and was manned by Ghurkas. The battalion which we fired over was the Seaforths, and to reach them

I had to make my way along the trench for a hundred yards or so, to where they joined the Ghurkas. The little men from the far-away hills of Nepal were mostly asleep, curled up like cats in nests which each had scooped for himself in the road-side ; some, however, were working away busily with pick and spade, while at intervals sentries peered intently through loopholes at the enemy across the road.

I reached the Scots, visited our two battery telephonists, who existed on black tea and Woodbines, at the bottom of a burrow they had dug themselves, and then went to battalion headquarters, which were installed in the remains of a farm fifty yards or so behind the fire trench. Having reported myself to the Colonel, I started on a tour of the line occupied by the battalion. The sun had dispelled the morning mist and was shining pleasantly as I scrambled along a ditch which had been deepened and which served as a lateral way of communication behind the men lying in hollows and rifle-pits dug

along the edge of the road. Occasionally a sentry would fire his rifle or an enemy bullet would crack overhead. A smell peculiar to trenches hung in the air, a smell which seemed a mixture of the odours of earth, humanity, uncleanness, and the decay of death. The trench floor was beaten to a slush by the tramp of feet, while projecting objects such as tree roots were polished by the continual brushing by of passing men. A bend in the trench brought me suddenly upon two men and an officer kneeling beside a figure that lay on the mud, moaning and twisting from side to side.

"Hit in the stomach, poor fellow!" said the officer, "as he was building up a bit of the parapet. I'm afraid he's done." I had to step over the dying man and had to place my foot a few inches from the marble face, whose eyes had lost their reason and whose lips kept on repeating: "Ah, Lorrd, I'm sufferrin'!" Farther on, the trench crossed the road and passed through a house from which one had to

bolt through a door in full view of the enemy, who had a rifle laid on the spot. I arrived breathless into the trench on the far side and there met a burly colour-sergeant.

"Yon's a pleasant spot, sirr!" he said. "They killed three lads coming through that door yesterday."

"Charming place," I said, "but which I won't visit more than necessary. Is there any good place to observe from here?"

"Yes, sirr. Come with me and keep well doon for the trench is verra shallow."

I advanced awkwardly, with my head down and with the feeling that another part of me was uncomfortably exposed.

"Here we are, sirr. Put your head up slowly."

We cautiously raised our heads and looked over the parapet. In front was a field of potatoes, pitted with shell-holes, and a hundred yards or so away some vague lines of yellow and brown earth, beyond which were the skeletons of some brick houses.

"Not much to see," and, as I spoke,

there was an ear-splitting crack and a bullet smashed against the wall of the house behind us. Another crack and a spout of earth was flung up in our faces. We both dodged down under cover.

“Yon Gairman’s spotted us.”

We moved along the trench and put our heads up again. As my eyes appeared above the parapet, to my horror I found myself looking straight into the decaying and leering face of a dead German officer who lay on the far side of the parapet, not a yard off, while beyond him other dead forms, stiff and bloated, lay scattered over the field. I found out that a week previously the enemy had made a small local attack here at night and had been driven back.

Suddenly there was a sharp cry to the right, the sound of a fall and of men’s voices. I turned a traverse and found a man lying dead in the narrow trench. He had been sniped, and the bullet, entering the forehead, had blown the back of his head clean off. I looked at the smashed and

splintered skull, at the mess of brains and blood, and I said to myself :

“The Glory of War.”

Completing the round of the battalion front, I made my way back to the telephone, spoke to the battery, and was told to observe their fire, so, choosing a position of observation, I waited. Suddenly there was a rushing sound in the air; a mighty swish overhead and a puff of smoke above the enemy trenches. This continued, and I sent the necessary reports back by telephone. When the Major was satisfied with the results our firing ceased, but the enemy, stirred to anger, replied with salvos of high explosive which burst with a rending detonation in the air above our trenches, making the infantry complain bitterly that whereas our shrapnel burst with no more noise than a pop-gun the enemy shells exploded like the crack of doom, and it was in vain that I pointed out the difference in the nature of the shell.

On 15th November we left the area about Neuve Chapelle and marched north to

rejoin the infantry of our Division who had gone ahead to relieve the French about Wytschaete. These French troops had arrived in the beginning of November to take over from the exhausted cavalry the line about the Messines Ridge which was now held by the enemy. The march took two days, and was most disagreeable owing to the sleet and biting wind. About mid-day on 17th November we passed through Neuve Eglise and along the cobbled road to Dranoutre. To our right we got glimpses of the Messines Ridge and of the village dominated by the battered outline of the Institute, and a mile to the east of the Dranoutre-Loire Road rose the wooded hill of Kemmel, which, topped by a tower, stands as a landmark for many miles around.

Leaving the battery, I rode forward with the Major to reconnoitre the positions which we were to take over. We met a French Lieutenant of the battery that we were to relieve, and rode forward with him along the road which skirts the northern

slopes of Kemmel Hill. Very heavy shells were sailing majestically through the air and bursting on the top of the hill, throwing up great purple and sepia columns of smoke and earth.

We came upon the French guns in action in a small valley behind a low spur, which was an under-feature of the main hill. Small trees and branches cut from neighbouring woods were planted among the guns and limbers to conceal them from enemy aeroplanes. Dismounting from our horses we followed the Frenchman on foot across the valley and up the spur, at the crest of which we entered a narrow and muddy trench. This we toiled along, cursing the mud and trying to please the Lieutenant by keeping ourselves doubled up. After fifty yards or so, the trench became covered in and carefully concealed with turf. We dived into confined blackness which was highly flavoured, and reappeared in a sort of cabin cut into the ground, roofed with boards and provided with a small table on which were littered maps and papers. On the

opposite side to the entrance from the dank and narrow tunnel by which we had arrived was a long slit, some three inches high and about a yard wide, which let in a slab of light and which gave a magnificent view of the country to the eastward. A telescopic director and a pair of prism binoculars were at hand to aid vision and measure necessary angles. Off this cabin was a hole burrowed into the earth wall, and here there squatted, on a pile of straw, a dark and bearded French telephonist who, between moments of rapid conversation, read *Le Petit Journal* and smoked innumerable cigarettes. The Lieutenant who had been our guide now introduced us to the *chef de batterie*, a swarthy French Captain, dressed in the dark blue uniform of the French gunners. There followed, in the congested confines of the dug-out, a consultation over a *plan directeur*, and then my Major and the French Captain peered together out of the slit.

In front, the ground fell away steeply to the village of Keminel, with its château

visible through the bare trees ; beyond, it rose gently but steadily to a low but pronounced ridge, on which, behind a large dark wood, stood the square tower and red houses of Wytschaete.

“ You see that wood ? Carry your eye to the right and you see a road running up to the village.”

“ Yes.”

“ Good ! Now follow the road down from the crest and you come upon three tall trees grouped together. There is our front line ; it runs along those willows to the right and then behind a knoll. Through the glasses you can see the trenches. Good ! Look to the left and you see it running by a row of poplars just beyond that red farm, and then disappears. You have that ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Good ! You see the enemy line just beyond and roughly parallel to ours. My zone extends two degrees to the right and a degree to the left of the three trees. I will now put a shell there for you.” He turned to the telephonists and gave an order,

“ Quatrième piece — point de repère — correcteur vingt—trois mille deux cents cinquante.”

There was a pause, broken by a sharp, incisive report, and some seconds later a puff of smoke appeared above the enemy trenches.

A moment later, as if in retaliation, the enemy started to shell, and the brown line of our trenches became obscured by clouds of black and white smoke, a concatenation of explosions struck our ears, and the telephone sounded.

“ ‘Allo! ‘Allo! Bien. Je le lui dis!’ ” and the telephonist turned to the French Captain, “ Our infantry want support, as they are being shelled.”

A string of orders was rapped out, and in a few seconds the battery behind us was galvanized in a frantic energy. The discharge of the guns was so rapid that one could not count them, and it seemed as if some giant machine-gun was in action. The effect was soon apparent, for the enemy fire ceased and all was quiet again, except for

random shells which whined here and there, and for the persistent heavy, who every ten minutes burst pompously on Kemmel Hill.

Leaving the *poste d'observation*, we struggled back through the trench, down into the valley, and across to the battery. The long, blue-grey tubes of the soixante-quinze nosed wickedly out of the spruce and laurels planted about them ; and appearing from and disappearing into a warren dug in the ground were French gunners. We were shown, with pardonable pride, the beauties of the queen of guns, the length of barrel which meant length of range, the pneumatic buffer which never jammed nor failed and allowed of an intensely rapid fire, the simplicity of her sights, the strength and lightness of her carriage ; and we saw, too, the grey shells, the simple fuses, and the *debouchoir* which mechanically set those fuses with speed and accuracy. We could not but admire this wonderful weapon, so practical, so scientific, and so delightfully French ; yet we preferred our old love,

the 18-pounder, for, with all its carriage defects of heaviness and clumsiness and mechanical complexity, it fired the heaviest shell of all field guns, and the yell of its bullets has and will many times strike terror into the fat, fair faces on the other side.

Next day we relieved the French battery, who departed in an astonishingly democratic manner, moving off piled with a miscellaneous assortment of coats, blankets, and pots and pans.

The temperature dropped in the night to below freezing, binding with iron the roads and fields, and crusting with ice the water in the shell-holes, while a light fall of snow powdered the ground and silvered the bare branches of the trees.

Next morning I was up before dawn, walking along the road that led down into the village of Kemmel. Here and there spirals of smoke showed where cooks were preparing breakfasts for the men still asleep within the houses. I passed by the château and reached a cross-roads, which afterwards came to be known as

“Suicide corner”; and here, lying across the steps of a deserted and ruined estaminet, were two French soldiers, dead and frozen hard, yet looking as if they did but sleep and would at any moment rise and brush the snow from off their faces. Half a mile farther on I was stopped by a sentry, and he directed me to a dug-out where the Battalion Headquarters were located. Here I asked my way to the fire trench.

“Oh, keep straight on down the road. I think you will just have time to get there before the mist clears. One cannot go in daylight, as the way is in full view of the enemy, and the communication trench has fallen in and is full of water.”

I continued on my way down the road, crossed some empty trenches, and found myself in a wilderness which appeared deserted, and which was blasted and riven in all directions by great conical holes filled with ice-encrusted water, and by lines of disused trenches. The sun had risen, and the mists of the morning were being rapidly dispelled. I looked anxiously

round at the ever-increasing circle of my vision. Everywhere was stillness and empty desolation. Here and there I saw, lying in queer and stiffly pathetic attitudes, the forms of dead Frenchmen, clothed in blue and red, while many of their Lebel rifles lay rusting and frozen to the ground.

The atmosphere got clearer, so that I could see our own front line about two hundred yards ahead, and beyond the sinister form of the enemy trenches.

A sudden crack sounded in my ears and a wind like the breath of death fanned my cheek. My heart bumped as I realized that an enemy sniper had seen me, and I commenced to run forward. Another and another shot made my ears sing. A bullet struck the ground at my feet and others flicked by me until, seeing a convenient trench, I jumped into it, to plunge into freezing water and to find as my companion a dead Frenchman. Anything being better than this, I scrambled out and continued my race to our front line, which I reached in safety.

Here, with intervals of shelling and sniping, I remained until the evening, when I returned to the battery, passing in the darkness infantry reliefs tramping in silence to the trenches.

One morning after breakfast found me walking up and down the battery, stamping on the frozen ground to warm my feet, and smoking my morning pipe, whose fragrance was enhanced by the clear and sparkling air. Above me rose the massive hill of Kemmel, which, for the time being, was free from the rude attentions of the heavy howitzers. As I was off duty, I decided that I could not pass a spare hour better than by climbing the hill and seeing the magnificent view that it afforded. So, slinging on my glasses and stuffing a map into my pocket, I commenced the ascent. I left the main road and went up a steep, moss-grown path which led through a wood of beech and oak and fir. Here, amid the silent colonnades of trees and amongst the frosted undergrowth, glinting in the sunlight, I felt myself far away

indeed from the drab monotony and sudden terrors of war, until a turn in the path would bring me upon a ten-foot hole blasted in the ground or a sixty-foot tree snapped off by a shell as a finger snaps a match.

At length I reached the ruined tower on the summit, which stood in an open field pitted with great shell-holes, and the view of the country that lay stretched below me was ineffable in its beauty, its interest, and its grandeur.

Away to the north, a plain, fertile and populous, stretched to the pearl-grey horizon twenty miles beyond, and in the centre of this plain, beyond the gleaming waters of Dickebusch lake, the spires of Ypres showed clear and white above a dark belt of trees. Three miles to the eastward lay a ridge seamed with ever-growing trenches, and crowned on either flank by the villages of Messines and Wytschaete, while beyond, etched against the sky, were the tall chimneys of the great manufacturing towns of Northern France. To the south spread the plain of the Lys, in the centre of which,

a contrast and a counterpoise to Ypres in the north, lay the ugly and industrial city of Armentières. From left to right across this picture wound the opposing lines of trenches, which marked the boundary between the hope of freedom and the faith of power. To the eye the whole countryside appeared deserted; only here and there the spark of a gun flash or the smoke of a bursting shell proved the contrary, that here was WAR.

CHAPTER XV

THE CLOSE OF THE YEAR

ON 11th November the Prussian Guard, exhorted by their Kaiser, attacked in mass along the Menin Road in a last desperate effort to break the English line. By weight of shell and weight of numbers they flooded across our pounded trenches and on to the Nonne-Bosch Wood. But here they were checked and rolled back by the fire and steel of the 2nd Battalion of the Oxford and Bucks, the 52nd of the Line that a hundred years before had swept fiercely in a wave of red upon the dark column of the Imperial Guard. After this, the German assaults decreased in weight and determination until, well before the end of the month, with the coming of the frost and snow, they had ceased altogether.

By December trench warfare had set in, and each side worked by day and night to improve its defences and to contend with the mud and cold. This unlooked-for change from open warfare to the operations of a siege in which the opposing forces lay for hundreds of miles within a stone's throw of each other, was due in part to the gigantic numbers engaged, in part to the defensive power of the rifle and machine-gun, and in part to the common exhaustion of shell without a prodigal supply of which any offensive was doomed to failure. And so behind that barrier of earth and men the factories of the world were working without cessation to produce the weapons which would decide the future of mankind.

With the setting in of winter a definite system of reliefs was instituted, so that the troops could get rest and change from the monotony and discomfort of the trenches. It would be difficult to exaggerate the hardships endured by the infantry during this period, for they were without those materials and articles which time

and experience have shown necessary to cope with the ravages of cold and wet and inanition. There were no boards to floor the trenches, nor material to rivet the sides, and a sandbag was a precious thing. The bottoms of trenches were mires of cold and tenacious mud in which men would sink to their waists and remain immovable for hours. On occasions the parapets on either side would disintegrate and disappear, exposing the defenders, who would gaze at each other, smile grimly and set to work to build them up again. Cases of frostbite and "trench feet" were far more numerous than wounds. A battalion after relief, marching back to billets at two miles an hour, each man encrusted with a layer of mud, stiff with rheumatism and with feet swollen and aching with pain, was a common sight along those dreary Belgian roads. Compared to the infantry, the batteries lived in luxury, but even with them the contest with the mud was ceaseless, though it took a different form. In the soft, wet ground the guns

would sink to their axle-trees and shift at every round they fired, which affected adversely the rate and accuracy of their shooting. And the unfortunate horses, without stables or cover, had to stand week after week in a sea of churned mud, often up to their hocks, and in consequence contracted mud sores, in some of which one could have put one's fist down to the bone.

Our normal routine was eight days in action and four days' rest in some farm a few miles behind the line. Of a morning, just as the red circle of the sun was beginning to peer through the mist, one might have seen our battery, led by the Major, moving at a walk towards the west, having just pulled out of action. Mud would be caked on the wheels of gun carriages and wagons, and would be splashed in yellow streaks upon the horses. The limbers and wagon-bodies would be piled with blankets, horse rugs, sacks of oats and trusses of hay, and the men, in mufflers and greatcoats, with belt, haversack, and water-bottle slung

across their shoulders, would trudge along the muddy roads behind the vehicles, chaffing or grumbling, according to their natures. We would pass by the 60-pounder battery and rumble through the village of Locre, swarming with the H.A.C., on past the 6-inch gun which bellowed periodically from the depths of a clump of trees and on down the road to Bailleul, which would be alive with traffic setting out on the day's work.

Eventually we would arrive at the farm that had been allotted to us, the guns and wagons would be drawn in precise lines and would be attacked by the limber gunners with buckets and brushes and oil-cans, and the horses of each section, under the supervision of the Section Commander, would be picketed in the eternal field of mud along lines of trees, whose bark was ringed by the gnawing of other horses.

Stables and inspections over, we would mount our chargers, and, followed by our grooms, would ride to Bailleul, where fierce colonels are rendered amiable by savoury

omelettes and cognac, and subalterns are served by damsels, who feed them on drinks as potent as expensive. And in the evening, while the men in the barns sang songs and wrote countless letters, the officers would dine in the parlour of the farm, wonder when the war would end, discuss the merits and demerits of sergeant "this" and corporal "that," argue fiercely whether horses should be clipped or not, and agree unanimously that theirs was the best battery in the British Army.

In December, rumours were current that we were to be granted seventy-two hours' leave, and at 5 a.m. one cold morning I found myself with many others in the cobbled square of Bailleul, boarding one of a row of London motor-buses whose advertisements flared out blatantly even in the darkness, and the glass of whose windows had been replaced by boards. As the buses lurched steadily on their long journey to Boulogne, the occupants related personal experiences for which editors in England would have sold their very souls.

With a laugh and in a few flavoured words they told of the fighting of the last two months from Ypres to Bethune; of bombardments that stunned the senses, blotted out the trenches, and shredded friends to pieces before their eyes; of German attacks in mass which faltered and collapsed before our rifle fire; of hand-to-hand struggles in the blackness of night in which bayonets slipped so easily into bodies that squealed for mercy; of the hardships of the trenches, that were but miry ditches in which men stood to their waists in mud and grew numb as they gazed across a litter of decaying dead at the ever-growing earthworks of the enemy.

About 10 a.m. the bus descended steeply into the town of Boulogne and stopped on the paved quayside. In another hour I was leaning on the ship's rail, with the salt spray beating on my face and the coast of England growing clearer every instant. With a clang of the engine-room telegraph, a curving sweep astern, and a churning of waters, we brought up against the Folke-

stone pier, where a train was ready and waiting. Soon I was leaning back on the cushions of a corner seat, with an unopened paper on my knee, and England as prim and neat and lovable as ever rolling by the windows. With a roar and a flash of water we were across the Thames, sliding to rest in the echoing vault of Victoria Station.

I threaded my way in a taxi through the traffic of London. I had imagined there would be a change, some outward mark of the war stamped on the face of the great city, but it was all the same as ever—buses and taxis and luxurious limousines streaming down the roads, and countless people hurrying hither and thither along the pavements and in and out of the houses and shops.

No sign of war—and I was amazed. Did they not yet realize what was in progress out there? And then, as if in answer to my question, there swung down the street and past the windows of my taxi a column of men; wearing caps and bowlers, carrying dummy rifles and drawing a dummy gun.

“ The new armies,” I said to myself, “ the jest of Germany, the hope of Britain.”

I looked and I was satisfied ; once before I had seen men with dummy rifles, and I knew that the true measure of a nation's greatness must be judged, not by the weapon in the hand, but by the spirit in the heart.

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